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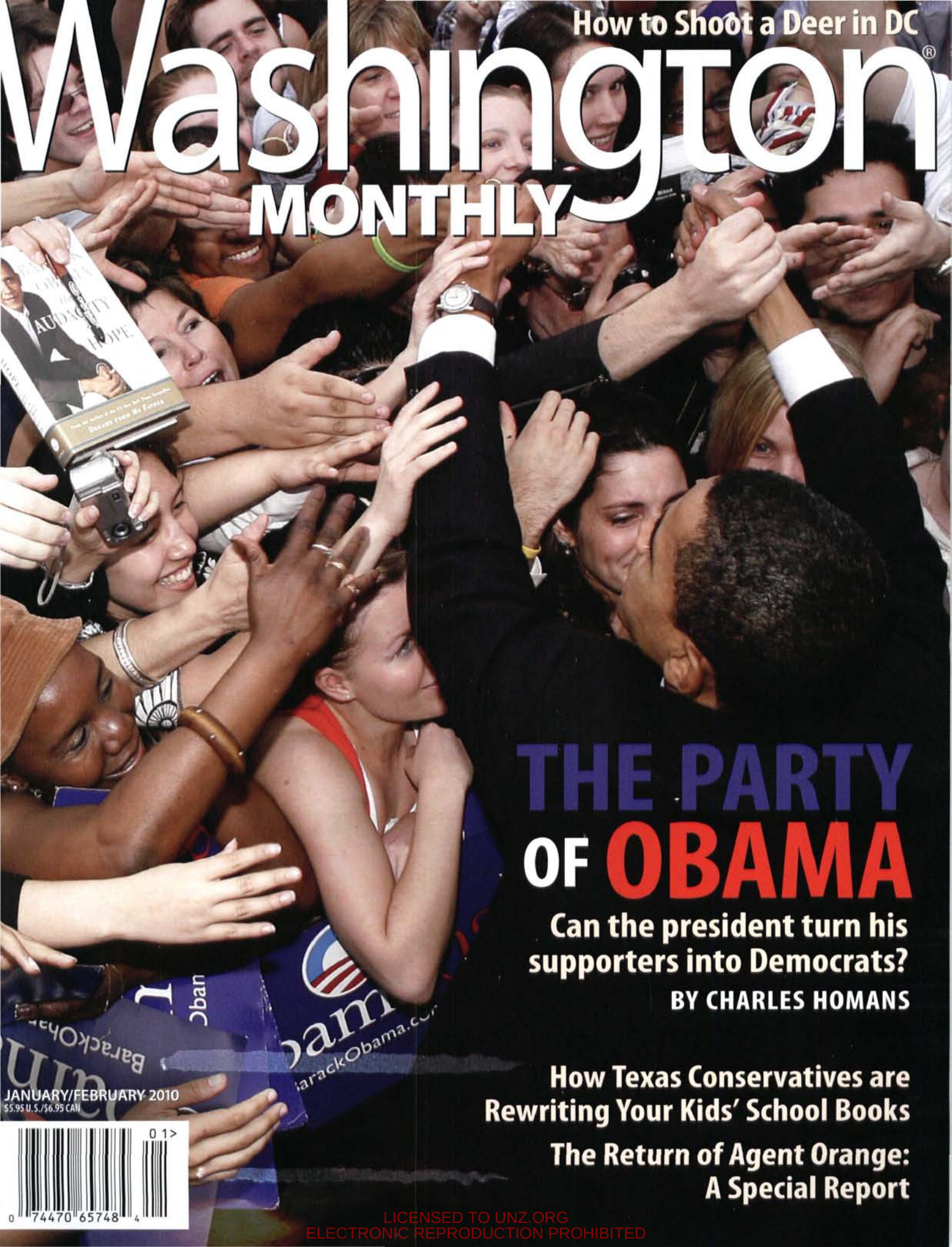

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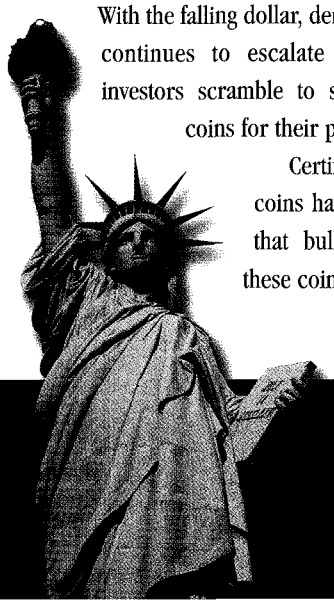

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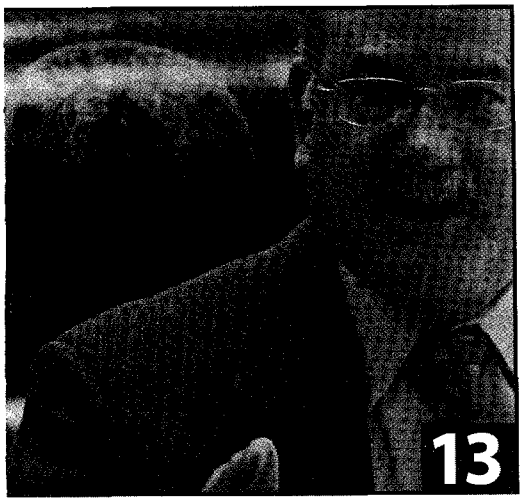

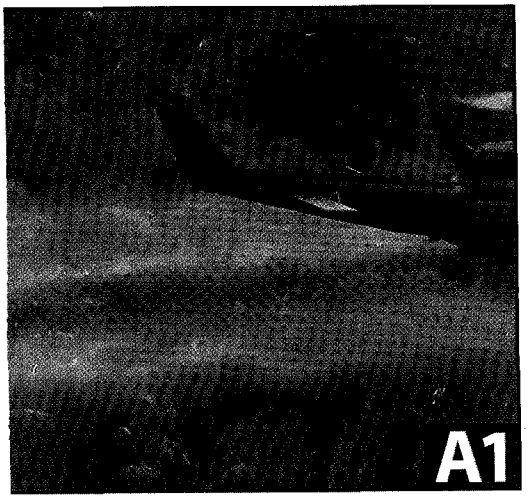


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**Subscription Rates:** U.S. and possessions: one year, $44.95; two years, $79.95; three years, $109.95. For Canadian and foreign subscriptions: add $10 per subscription year. Back issues, $6. *Washington Monthly* is indexed in the Book Review Index, Political Science Abstracts, Public Affairs Information Service, the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, and Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory and may be obtained on microfilm from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.
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**Editorial Offices:** 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036; telephone 202-955-9010; fax 202-955-9011. Unsolicited manuscripts can be e-mailed to editors@washingtonmonthly.com or sent to the editorial offices.

**Washington Monthly** (ISSN 0043-0633) is published bimonthly by Washington Monthly LLC, 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036. Washington Monthly LLC is wholly owned by W. M. Corporation, a District of Columbia 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

**POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Washington Monthly, 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036.**

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## Editor's Note

PAUL GLASTRIS

# 40 and 44

When asked two years ago for a historical analogy to his campaign for president, Barack Obama gave a surprising answer: Ronald Reagan. The Gipper, he said, "changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not." That comment was widely portrayed as a calculated dig at Hillary Clinton. But in his new book *The Audacity to Win* (considered by editor Charles Homans in "The Party of Obama," page 19), Obama campaign manager David Plouffe reveals that Obama's high command did indeed study the similarities between their candidate and Reagan. "Like Obama, Reagan was an outsider criticized for his lack of Washington experience and sometimes accused of offering more sizzle than steak," writes Plouffe. The campaign team reasoned that Obama could decisively dispel such perceptions the way Reagan had, with a strong performance in the presidential debates, and they turned out to be right.

Over the past year, Obama has reportedly become more and more convinced of, and reassured by, the parallels between himself and the fortieth president. "He thinks he is Reagan in reverse," notes *Newsweek*'s Howard Fineman, "a patient, genial game changer for the ages." The parallels are indeed hard to miss. Both men took the oath of office amid worst-since-the-Depression recessions, handed to them by administrations widely considered to have been ineffectual. As a result, both were able to pass major pieces of legislation that represented ideologically bold breaks with the past. But both also ended their first year weakened by sagging poll numbers driven by high unemployment. So as we approach Obama's first State of the Union address, it's worth looking at how Reagan handled the same task, with the confidence that Obama and his people are, too.

That 1982 speech is remembered for a story Reagan told of an invited guest named Lenny Skutnik who had rescued a plane crash victim from the icy waters of the Potomac, pioneering the now-obligatory everyday-hero-in-the-audience segment of the State of the Union. But rereading the rest of the speech, what is most striking is its tone, which is much less sunny and triumphant than we remember Reagan. The typical dramatic center of these addresses is the moment the president reports that "the state of our union is strong," or similar words. But Reagan offered what's probably the most subdued variation on the theme in history, promising that "in the near future the state of the Union and the economy will be better—much better—if we summon the strength to continue on the course."

What's also noticeable is the speech's wonkiness. In place of grand rhetoric are long didactic passages on the connections between government spending, tax rates, inflation, money supply, regulations, entitlements, "categorical grant programs," and so forth. The effect was deliberate, says Tony Dolan, who wrote the speech. "Reagan had to prove he could do policy," Dolan told me recently, and because the president's conservative initiatives were largely new to the American public, he had the burden of explaining "how all the policy pieces fit together."

The speech barely slowed the decline in Reagan's poll numbers, which turned around only when the unemployment rate did. But it succeeded in framing the recession as the logical consequence of decades of liberal policy—and portraying conservative policy as the logical alternative. In so doing it laid down a marker: if the economy turned around, Reagan could claim that his conservative ideas were the reason. Now, not everyone would agree that the prosperity that did, in fact, follow, validated conservative economic theory. One could easily argue—I would in fact argue—that Reagan's tax-cuts-plus-massive-defense-spending agenda acted as a classic Keynesian stimulus. But no matter: the fact that the economy responded as Reagan predicted gave credence to his ideas for a generation. It's a little like the home run Babe Ruth hit in game three of the 1932 World Series: it's the one we most remember because he pointed to where it would land.

Unlike Reagan, Obama doesn't have to prove his wonk credentials. And with the unemployment rate having crested (we hope), he may be freer to be more rhetorically uplifting. But he should follow Reagan's example and define, more clearly than he has so far, what his theory of economic growth is and how it differs from his conservative predecessors'. He should explain to the American people how the different parts of his agenda—the stimulus spending, the TARP funds, and the efforts to reform health care, education, the energy sector, and financial markets—all fit together and how, over time, he expects them to improve America's economic fundamentals. Of course, if the economic fundamentals don't improve, nothing he says in the speech will matter. But if in a few years the economy is back on its feet, then the speech will have helped lay the intellectual groundwork not just for the recovery, but for a new governing philosophy with the potential staying power of Reaganomics. WM



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# ·L·E·T·T·E·R·S·

## FEELING A LOAN

The overwhelming preponderance of career college students enroll, graduate, and find suitable, well-paid employment with none of the divisive issues described in Stephen Burd's article, "The Subprime Student Loan Racket" (November/December 2009). It's not surprising that this writer would miss the forest for the trees. He has been a persistent critic of career colleges for years, although his views appear to be shaped in conversations with self-interested plaintiffs' attorneys and not by actually visiting schools or speaking with students, as we invited him to do. Were he to visit, Burd would find a far different picture than the one he paints for *Washington Monthly* readers.

Career colleges serve 2.7 million students, a high percentage of whom are nontraditional students. Over half of the student population in career colleges is composed of minorities. Eighty percent are independent adults. Most are first-generation college students. Often, they are economically disadvantaged. These are individuals dramatically underserved by other types of institutions, or who are being turned away these days by state and community colleges with funding cuts and rising demands. In career college, they find a learning environment that adapts to their individual needs, responds to their academic or personal challenges, provides schedule flexibility for busy lifestyles, and prepares them for something more than just receiving a sheepskin: the transition to gainful employment. Over 60 percent of our students (four-year, two-year, and certificate) complete their programs, not the 38 percent cited in your article. We welcome outcome metrics, unlike much of traditional higher education that has fought them tooth and nail.

Reduced economic circumstances and not artful practices by schools or lenders explain why career college students default on their loans at higher rates than the elite institutions that more and more, according to all available research, are recruiting students almost exclusively from the highest socioeconomic strata. Community colleges and minority-serving institutions, also serving economically disadvantaged students, also average higher cohort default rates. Does this mean that poor students should not be able to borrow to attend the school of their choice? Certain patronizing critics may think so. But not allowing students to borrow is a sure prescription for limiting and ultimately eliminating higher education access.

Career college students understand their higher education options. They have a choice. They value the connection between purposeful postsecondary education and practical, employable job skills. If lower-cost, workable options to gain the same educational experience were available, students would take them instead. Today, they see a difference in value worth paying to receive. That is why enrollment in the career education sector is growing at an average annual rate of over 10 percent. As a society, we should applaud the fact that our most at-risk students are willing to borrow in order to invest in themselves and the future.

*Harris N. Miller*
*President and CEO*
*Career College Association*

***Stephen Burd responds:***
*Mr. Miller contends that 60 percent of proprietary school students graduate, not the 38 percent stated in my article. I do not know the source of his number, but mine comes from an October 2008 American Enterprise Institute study by Mark Schneider, the former commissioner of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. Schneider found that for-profit colleges had the lowest median graduation rate of any sector in higher education at 38 percent—which he noted was "almost twenty points lower than their private nonprofit counterparts and seven points lower than public institutions," including community colleges. Schneider, who led the NCES from 2005 to 2008, based his study on data colleges reported to the NCES's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System in the 2005–06 academic year.*

*The study, which was entitled "The Costs of Failure Factories in American Higher Education," can be found at www.aei.org/outlook/28863.*

CORRECTION: Stephen Burd's article "The Subprime Student Loan Racket" (November/December 2009) overstated the total student loan balance that Martine Leveque, a graduate of the Licensed Vocational Nursing program at the Alhambra campus of Everest College, faces. According to Sallie Mae records, which were provided to the *Washington Monthly* by Corinthian Colleges, Ms. Leveque's total outstanding balance is approximately $32,000, which is less than the $40,000 the article stated. In addition, the article overstated the proportion of private loans that Everest College included in her financial aid package. Private loans made up about 42 percent of her financial aid package, rather than the two-thirds estimate that the article provided.



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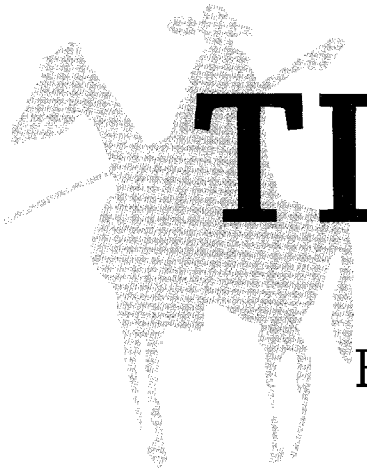

# TILTING *at windmills*

By Charles Peters

## Temporary help wanted

Obama talks only about creating permanent jobs, but he should not fear temporary jobs that can bridge the gap until private employers begin hiring again. Temporary jobs are exactly what Franklin Roosevelt's CCC and the WPA provided.

This year, thank goodness, the Census should result in roughly 1 million temporary jobs. Another possibility is to give federal, state, and local governments the money to hire temporary employees to install storm windows and other devices to increase the energy efficiency of government buildings. Much of the work involved is not complicated and the modest skills needed could be quickly learned. The CCC proved that many valuable conservation functions can be performed without extensive training. Millions more could be hired to work in jobs such as teacher's or nurse's aides in public schools and public clinics and hospitals, for which they could be quickly trained and in which they could acquire skills leading to permanent employment.

## Word du jour

I have long been fascinated by how certain words attain the status of "in" and then appear over and over in conversation and in writing for the next several years. Soon after I entered Columbia in 1946, it became clear to me that those who aspired to intellectual respectability had to learn to make frequent use of "ambiguity" and "dichotomy." In the 1990s, "nuance" reigned supreme. It now seems to have been succeeded, at least among policymakers and commentators, by "robust."

## Leeson's lesson

As I was preparing this column, I saw Ben Bernanke on CNBC endorsing "proprietary trading by banks." That means that, in addition to accepting deposits and lending money as banks have traditionally done, they speculate on whether the price of a stock or a commodity or a currency or practically anything else will rise or fall. Remember Nick Leeson? He was the Barings Bank employee who provided an early warning of the trouble our own big banks would get into. He traded derivatives based on the Nikkei average. "What was a bank doing speculating on the Nikkei average?" we should have asked. Leeson made a series of bad bets and catastrophic losses quickly followed. And Wall Street, freed by the repeal of Glass-Steagall, proceeded to repeat Barings's mistakes.

Why not have banks stick to their traditional knitting? That was what the Glass-Steagall Act required until Lawrence Summers and Robert Rubin and Alan Greenspan got it repealed. Only Paul Volcker now speaks out in favor of separating trading from banking, and Summers has apparently succeeded in freezing him out of the White House.

## Help wanted

I'm glad to see that former Fed vice chairman Alan Blinder, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, and Alec MacGillis, in the *Washington Post*, are calling for more stimulus in the form of more government jobs. Direct government employ worked in the 1930s to put more than 20 million people to work and, as I pointed out in our March/April 2009 issue, government can create jobs faster than the process Obama has followed of contracting out through private employers.

But "government can't do anything right" has become the view of far too many Americans, and it is Obama's fear of their criticism that keeps him from considering government employment as a way of dealing with the jobs problem. I, however, have had eighty-three years to observe government programs, and I can tell you that though some agencies are incompe-

> There has been absolutely no sign that Karzai has the will or the competence to reform. What we should do now in Afghanistan is exactly what we should have done in Vietnam in 1965—start getting out.



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tent, other have proved themselves capable of truly amazing accomplishments. But people need to understand that agencies rarely stay good. They can start out doing great things but end up serving little besides their own bureaucratic self-interest. Recall the example of the Rural Electrification Administration that I mentioned several issues ago, which did such a remarkable job of bringing power and light to American farms during the 1930s but by the 1990s degenerated to financing country club improvements just to justify its continued existence.

Franklin Roosevelt understood this. That's why when he wanted something done, he often created a new agency. The drive and idealism of new employees can do wonders. For example, FDR's Civil Works Administration put 4 million people to work during the winter of 1933–34. Between them, the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration employed 11 million.

At various times during my nearly half century in Washington, the Department of Justice, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Internal Revenue Service, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Food and Drug Administration, among many others, have performed extremely well. But indifferent or hostile presidents, inept oversight by Congress, and bureaucratic longevity have brought many of them down. The SEC, for example, had by the last decade become scandalously oblivious to its duties.

Franklin Roosevelt understood that the drive and idealism of new employees can do wonders. That's why when he wanted something done, he often created a new agency.

Having been part of a new agency and seen firsthand the miracle that could be worked, I pray that Obama will follow FDR's example. But first he must make several fireside chats explaining enough history of government to the American people to convince them that the Johnny One Notes who sing only the antigovernment song are just plain wrong. And he must make sure he has people on his White House staff who know how to make government work, and I mean the executive branch of government where policy is turned into action. The current White House is full of policy and legislative expertise, but not the knowledge of how to make a jobs program effective.

## Tax the traders

John C. Whitehead, a retired cochairman of Goldman Sachs, has called Wall Street pay levels "shocking." Unfortunately, almost all of his former colleagues disagree. But I have a solution to this problem: make the tax on income derived from trading 50 percent higher than the tax on other income. Trading does not create or produce anything. Let's encourage bright people to do something else.

## The immune system

Did you know that, according to Adam Liptak of the *New York Times*, "prosecutors cannot be sued for anything they do during a trial including knowingly submitting false evidence"? I was trained as a lawyer and practiced in criminal courts for three years, but I was still shocked to learn about prosecutors' immunity.

In one of the cases currently before the U.S. Supreme Court that occasioned Liptak's article, the issue is whether prosecutors can be held liable for pretrial conduct even if it includes "coaching and coercing a witness into giving false testimony." The case is being brought against Iowa prosecutors by two former prisoners who had been freed by the Iowa Supreme Court when it concluded that same witness was "a liar and a perjurer."

A promising indication of the kind of justice Sonia Sotomayor will be is provided by her comment during the argument in this case that "neither of the two prosecutors in this case were sanctioned in any way for their conduct." She added that courts and bar associations rarely punish similar behavior by lawyers, clearly implying that a civil suit brought by the two former prisoners in Iowa is the only realistic way to bring about justice.

## Conning accounting

Here's another example of the mischief banks have gotten into after the repeal of Glass-Steagall. J. P. Morgan Securities, a branch of JPMorgan Chase, has agreed to pay $25 million to the SEC and $50 million to Jefferson County, Alabama, to settle a case in which it is charged with making what the *New York Times* describes as "unlawful payments to friends of Jefferson County commissioners in a scheme to win lucrative business from the county to sell bonds and *trade in derivatives*." Italics supplied.

## Beefing up the FDA

One place where more government employees are definitely needed is in the inspection and enforcement branches of almost every regulatory agency, whether it is regulating health, safety, or financial institutions. These functions, already shortchanged in 2001, were eviscerated by the George W. Bush administration.

Take just one recent example: job injuries are habitually underreported to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, according to the Government Accountability Office. Obviously, OSHA needs more staff to find out what the true figures are. As for food safety, haven't you read enough stories about contaminated meat, poultry, and vegetables to make you a little apprehensive about what you're getting at your local grocery store? A recent *New York Times* headline reported "E. Coli Outbreak Traced to Company That Halted Testing of Ground Beef." Why had the company halted testing? Because, the *Times* reports, the grinding companies are pressured by slaughterhouses who fear inspections would "cause expanded recalls." Pardon me, but aren't recalls good if the meat is bad?



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## Gold trim on the ivory tower

Once again recalling Columbia 1946, I remember the tuition was $225 a term. What a contrast with the outrageous cost of higher education today! In considering why that cost keeps rising faster than the rate of inflation, one possible culprit deserves more attention. It is the compensation of administrators and the growing size of administrative staffs.

The number of private college presidents earning more than $1 million a year doubled in 2007–08, according to a study reported by John Hechinger of the *Wall Street Journal*. As for the number of administrators, it has increased not only by the usual tendency of bureaucracies to grow but by the official or unofficial tenure often granted administrative staff. Those who prove incompetent or unneeded remain in their jobs anyway, often with annual pay increases.

## The view from the golf course

To understand why Washington's big shots don't feel the pain the recession has inflicted on the average citizen, it helps to know a little about the Bacara Resort & Spa near Santa Barbara, California, where Ben Bernanke recently went to speak at a conference sponsored by the San Francisco Fed. Suites can cost as much as $2,000 a night, according to Bacara's Web site, and "every one of the 311 rooms and 49 special suites is like the rest of the resort: luxurious, understated, intimate and relaxed. Every room features a private patio or balcony."

After doing his duty in Santa Barbara, Bernanke flew to the Boston Fed's conference at the Wequassett Inn on Cape Cod, where the in-season rate for a suite is a mere $2,800 a night. Its Web site, and I'm indebted to the great Al Kamen of the *Washington Post* for his research on this entire story, describes it as "a secluded paradise for the discerning traveler." It adds, "We could tell you we are quite simply the best resort on Cape Cod. But we wouldn't want to be guilty of understatement."

## Teaching the teachers

"Education schools are hopeless. Here's how to fix them," says a recent op-ed in the *New York Times*. The solutions mentioned in the article include making sure that the teachers know their subject and that they are effective in the classroom. What's discouraging about this is that the *Washington Monthly* began preaching this gospel in our second issue, March 1969, almost forty-one years ago. We have, as with our other favorite causes, not hesitated to elaborate and repeat our case many, many times over the years. The net effect, however, has been close to zero because the power of these schools and their allies in state legislatures is great. But Barack Obama and Arne Duncan seem to understand the problem, so there is at least reason to hope we will finally see real action.

## Academic error

Yale and Harvard continue to prohibit ROTC programs on their campuses. This is an outrageous legacy of the excesses of the antiwar movement of the Vietnam era. It discourages a substantial group of brilliant young people from serving their country and encourages the growth of the gulf between America's intellectual elite and our military, a gulf that is costly to both groups.

> Yale and Harvard continue to prohibit ROTC programs on their campuses, discouraging brilliant young people from serving their country and widening the gulf between America's intellectual elite and our military.

## You may already be a suspect!

The FBI recently told the Senate Judiciary Committee that each day 1,600 people qualify for its "watch list." The total number of people on this list is now 400,000. They make the list because an FBI "assessment" has deemed that there is a "reasonable suspicion" that they are terrorists or would help terrorists.

I find it hard to believe that the FBI is capable of making 1,600 such assessments in one day—or at least doing so intelligently. But, granted that they can, why are only 9 percent of those on the watch list also on the government "no-fly list"? I know that sounds crazy, but that is what the FBI has testified, according to the *Washington Post*'s Walter Pincus.

## Night terrors

On November 23, a *Wall Street Journal* headline reported that "Americans Seek Up to 7,000 Extra NATO Troops for Ramp-Up in Afghanistan." But just a week before, the *Journal* reported something that cast considerable doubt on the usefulness of the NATO troops, assuming they are actually forthcoming. It seems that the German troops now in Afghanistan "don't like to go out at night." Apparently, they assume that the Taliban consists entirely of nine-to-five clock watchers.

## The good Shepard

I was delighted to see Fox News's Shepard Smith recognized by the *Washington Post*'s media critic, Howard Kurtz. Smith deserves high praise for resisting his colleagues' tendency to tilt the news to the right. I would also add that many, if not all, at CNN deserve credit for resisting the tendency to tilt in any direction. At MSNBC, I find myself agreeing with most of the opinions and acknowledge that there is much less outright lying than at Fox. Still, facts favorable to the conservative case are rarely emphasized and sometimes not even mentioned.

## Seniors' racket

I was delighted to see a major media institution tell the story, oft repeated here, of the AARP's dependence on a health insurance company. Dan Eggen of the *Washington Post* reports that royalties from the AARP's selling of its endorsements have become "the primary source of revenue for the group." And 63 percent of those royalties come from UnitedHealth Group. I can



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assure you that what this means is that, as long as the AARP endorses the White House's health care bill, the Obama administration will do nothing to reform the Medigap policies endorsed by AARP that are UnitedHealth Group's main cash cow.

Seniors think these policies will cover the gap between doctors' and hospitals' bills and the amount actually reimbursed by Medicare. In fact, because of insurance company manipulation of the rules, these policies pay only the difference between "Medicare Authorized"—a figure the determination of which is heavily influenced by the health insurance lobby—and "Medicare Pays." That difference is occasionally substantial, but usually only a few dollars, meaning UnitedHealth Group is making a very substantial profit on the premiums.

## Liars in lab coats

As you may know, it has become all too common for prominent medical school professors to put their names on medical journal articles actually written by employees of pharmaceutical or medical device manufacturers. Senator Charles Grassley recently asked the top medical schools what they are doing to stop the practice. Duke replied, "Severe and/or repeated offenses will result in formal disciplinary action," leaving us to guess what constitutes severe and just what the disciplinary action would be—or, for that matter, why it would require repeated offenses to justify any punishment.

When asked if the schools saw any difference between the professors' behavior and plagiarism by a student, the University of Pennsylvania said it did. It maintains, according to a paraphrase from Duff Wilson of the *New York Times*, that "students who plagiarize a paper may know nothing about the subject" while "faculty members who sign their names to ghostwritten papers for research credit usually have some agreement with the paper." Unbelievable! How does the fact that the author has "some" agreement with the paper in any way justify his lying about its authorship?

## Barack's heel

"Perhaps [Obama] thought he was elevated to pass healthcare—they loved it in Iowa!—but in fact it was the economic crisis that got him elected, is now our national preoccupation, and will be the solution of which (or lack of one) that determines whether he's re-elected," notes Steven Stark in the *Boston Phoenix*.

Tough words, but I fear they are true. Stark got at something else in the same column that troubles me. It is that Obama has "never run anything before." He's gifted at inspiring us with his rhetoric but, Stark argues, "the hard, nitty-gritty labor of figuring out how government can actually work better ... seems to hold no appeal for him ... Put another way"—and here Stark inserts a dangerous shiv between the presidential ribs—"where are our flu shots?"

> Obama talks only about creating permanent jobs, but he should not fear temporary jobs that can bridge the gap until private employers begin hiring again.

I'm not sure Obama deserves blame for the swine flu problem, but he has appeared to me to be bureaucratically innocent, as the ineffective implementation of his program to aid those threatened with foreclosure has demonstrated.

## Tucker Carlson was onto something

On a lighter note, I'm happy to report a solution. It is to a problem that I suspect most of us hadn't even thought of: doctors' neckties. It seems that a study carried out at the New York Hospital Medical Center of Queens discovered that nearly half of physicians' neckties carry bacteria that, according to Rebecca Smith of the *Wall Street Journal*, "could cause illnesses such as pneumonia and blood infections." Smith, however, is not one of those reporters who frighten us with terrible problems but don't offer solutions. She reports that Dr. Robert Thompson has the answer to this knotty problem: he wears a bow tie.

## Echoes of Saigon

There is a strong case to be made for Obama's Afghan policy. Pulling out—or failing to escalate—involves real risks. The case for escalation in Vietnam appeared even stronger in July 1965 with Lyndon Johnson enjoying much more congressional and public support than Obama does now. But, however good the arguments for a policy are, the question remains: Will it work? And to that the answer in 1965 was no, just as is my answer today.

If we could not create an effective South Vietnamese army after more than a decade of a greater effort than Obama now plans in Afghanistan, how can we expect to train an effective Afghan security force by July 2011 or any reasonable time thereafter? So far our training of Afghan soldiers has been a farce. An American trainer told the *New York Times* "[an Afghan] soldier does not have to master any task prior to graduating [from training]. Attendance equals graduation."

During the Vietnam War, we made repeated attempts—including a CIA-sponsored coup—to reform the South Vietnamese government. Exhortations and threats abounded year after year after year. But no real reform took place because the South Vietnamese leaders did not truly want it or were incapable of implementing it. There has been absolutely no sign that Karzai has the will or the competence to reform. What we should do now is exactly what we should have done in Vietnam in 1965—start getting out. Above all stop risking the lives and the exposure to catastrophic injury for the handful of brave men who have been doing the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Remember the actual number of Army and Marine combat troops is less than 100,000. Those people have been stretched to the limit and beyond. WM

**Charles Peters** is the founding editor of the *Washington Monthly*.



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# TEN MILES SQUARE

*"... such District (not exceeding ten Miles square) ... [shall] become the Seat of the Government of the United States"*

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES

# Cull of the Wild

## How do you kill a deer in Washington?

By Tim Murphy

The full depth of the District's wildlife problem was on display one Sunday afternoon last November in the lion's den at the National Zoological Park. As a stunned crowd of Indian-summer tourists looked on, a white-tailed deer weaved through pedestrian traffic and vaulted the railing into the enclosure—where, after a brief chase, it found itself in the not-so-loving embrace of Nababiep and Shera, the zoo's two young lionesses.

Encounters like these are becoming more and more common in and around the nation's capital. Last spring, just across the D.C. line in Silver Spring, Maryland, a young buck crashed through the window of a Greek restaurant, then made its way to the bakery section of a nearby Giant supermarket before being apprehended and euthanized on account of its injuries. Four people were wounded in a similar incident when a deer burst through the window of a McDonald's near Union Station in 2002. Doe-eyed intruders have also cropped up everywhere from Metro platforms to the Tidal Basin to the vice president's backyard.

Forty years ago, seeing a deer in the District was an event roughly on par with spotting Sasquatch or Salinger; according to the National Park Service, there were only four deer sightings in Rock Creek Park in the entire 1960s. But with no natural predators and only the occasional swerving Volvo to halt its growth, the population has exploded in recent years: as of 2007, there were eighty-two deer per square mile in Rock Creek Park—roughly four times what wildlife specialists consider sustainable. The influx poses a serious threat to the forest ecosystem; deer damage their habitat by treating saplings and undergrowth like a veritable Old Country Buffet, preventing vegetation from regenerating and literally devouring the homes of other species. In a zero-sum ecosystem, their emergence necessarily comes at the expense of others. Ted Williams, a columnist for *Audubon* magazine, calls the white-tailed deer "the most dangerous and destructive wild animal in North America."

Washington is not the only city with an excess of ungulates; deer populations have mushroomed across the Northeast and parts of the Midwest. But the District has a unique vortex of variables that simultaneously nurtures the problem and prevents anything from being done about it. Few other urban areas have such an abundance of forests and parklands, allowing deer easy access to leafier neighborhoods. And whereas other cities have been able to take matters into their own hands, largely by hiring sharpshooters to cull the herds, D.C. has been hamstrung because most of its forests—including Rock Creek Park's main artery, which meanders down the center of the city's tony Northwest quadrant to the Potomac River—are managed by the National Park Service. This means the solution has to come via federal initiative, which in this case is more than a little oxymoronic: more than a decade after the feds began pondering how to tackle the District's deer problem, they still haven't fully settled on a solution, much less started picking off the invaders. In the meantime, the deer population—which can increase at a 40 percent clip in a good year—continues to grow like Topsy, at a cost to wildlife, vegetation, gardeners, and those just looking for a late-morning McGriddle.



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**The buck stops here:** A security camera captures a deer running along the platform of a Metro station in the Washington suburb of Seat Pleasant, Maryland, in 2003.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Rock Creek Park officials first noticed that the city was on the verge of being overrun in the late 1990s, but before they could apply for funding to research possible action plans, they needed incontrovertible, sustained proof that there actually was a problem. That took another four years of monitoring, by which point, of course, the problem was far worse.

But it wasn't enough to simply prove that something needed doing. Park officials then had to apply for money to produce a draft Environmental Impact Statement, as mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act, which meant languishing for months on the waiting list. Once the cash was in hand, the EIS itself took another four years to complete. The Park Service finally unveiled its opus last July. The 400-page draft report, packed with data tables and bureaucratic legalese, outlines the scope of the problem and a proposal for setting things right—namely, trained sharpshooters and euthanasia in the short term and, later, birth control, meaning sterilizing drugs administered via darts to does' rumps.

All done? Nope. Public comments on the draft have to be collected, then molded into a new version, which will again be open to public comment and revised as needed, before being passed up the chain of command for approval. This should take another twelve months or so, after which the Park Service will need to apply for more money to put the plan in action. Best-case scenario, the first sharpshooters could be prowling Rock Creek Park in the winter of 2011—and *best case* is the operative term. By contrast, Maryland's Montgomery County, which borders much of Northwest D.C., took just two years to produce its equivalent of an EIS: a relatively tame thirty-five-page report listing steps officials could take at their own discretion.

Meanwhile, even as D.C.'s plan inches its way through the federal bureaucracy, there are plots afoot to derail it. City Councilmember Phil Mendelson has already come out against sharpshooting, and the Washington Humane Society has launched a grassroots campaign to rally opposition. "The typical response of the federal government is to kill things," says Scott Giacoppo, the group's chief programs officer.

Any public protest could create particularly thorny obstacles in Washington. Because many of the city's public spaces are on federal property, it's often impossible to change the landscaping of a traffic circle or rename a playground without permission from the feds. The capital is also bursting with politically savvy insiders who know how to work the system to their advantage. This confluence makes activities in the city's public spaces uniquely vulnerable to citizen interference. A case in point: in 1996, a Hill staffer, incensed that he was unable to walk his dog in Park Service–operated Meridian Hill Park without a leash, rewrote a House appropriations bill to all but mandate the construction of a $100,000 dog run in the park to accommodate his free-range Fluffy. The plan was snuffed out when the *Washington Post* caught wind of the story, but the threat was a real one. The government's power of the purse in setting Park Service policy is a wild card that can leave even the best-laid plans in shambles.

Elsewhere in the country, when public pressure against lethal culling has proved too fierce, municipalities have tried to rein in deer populations through contraception alone. But that strategy is both far more costly (the Park Service estimated that contraceptives would cost about $1,000 per deer versus $200 to $400 for sharpshooting and $500 for euthanasia) and far less effective. "If your goal is to stabilize the population at high numbers, contraception will work," says Tom Rooney, a biology professor at Wright State University in Dayton, who runs the blog Deer Impacts. "But the high numbers are already problematic, so contraception would not solve those problems."

The nightmare scenario for D.C. park rangers may be the one that unfolded last summer at Point Reyes National Seashore in Northern California, where two nonnative deer species (first introduced to the area by a local hunter) were squeezing out native plant and animal species. After going through much the same process as Rock Creek without encountering much public opposition, Point Reyes hired White Buffalo, Inc., a nonprofit wildlife management service that helped manage wildlife populations in sixteen states and five different countries. Taking to the park in helicopters and shooting rocket-propelled



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nets to trap the deer, White Buffalo employees killed nearly 700 animals over a one-year period. But the outcry from activists soon became overwhelming.

State officials entered the fray, followed by the heavy artillery—Representatives George Miller and Lynne Woolsey, Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The concerned politicians, several of whom had been briefed on the plans for nearly a decade, drafted a letter asking the Park Service to cease fire and study a new report by the Humane Society, which advocated an all-contraception approach. "It seemed rather ludicrous that you'd have folks on that level of the political spectrum that would have even a minute of time when you have wars going on," says Dr. Anthony J. DeNicola, president of White Buffalo, "or that they would worry about non-native deer in a very pristine ecological setting after the park did a very intensive review and considered public comments."

Later that year, despite having published a stinging, two-page takedown of the Humane Society's arguments, the Park Service announced it was switching to an entirely contraceptive approach—a move it insists was coincidental. Complicating an already bizarre story was an item in the Interior Department appropriations bill, signed into law by President Obama on October 30, which prohibited any funds therein from being used to reduce the population of non-native deer at Point Reyes beyond its current total—a provision that would ban not just sharpshooting but contraception as well; if the ban holds, it will effectively bring the entire culling program to a halt. The language, inserted into the bill by Feinstein, amounted to a sort of nuclear option for wildlife management.

Ken Ferebee, a resource management specialist at Rock Creek Park, insists D.C.'s plan won't suffer the same fate, saying it "is not a political process, it's a scientific process," and thus is driven by data, not public whims. But history belies his optimism. Lions, grocery shoppers, and power lunchers should be on guard: Washington remains, as Henry Lee might have put it, first in war, first in peace, and last in ungulate management. WM

**Tim Murphy** is an intern at *Mother Jones*.

# Disclosed Encounters

## Why UFO buffs think Barack Obama is their best hope for the truth about ET.

By Daniel Fromson

"It's a hell of a challenge," says Stephen Bassett as he saws through his chicken Caesar salad at a restaurant in the Key Bridge Marriott in Arlington, Virginia. "But the reason we've made progress is because this isn't just *any* issue." After logging thirteen discouraging years as a lobbyist in Washington, Bassett is finally feeling optimistic. Compared to Barack Obama, Bill Clinton was "utterly unacceptable," and there were "huge problems" with George W. Bush. "They did what was necessary to contain the issue," he says.

"They had to do that because it wasn't a secret," he adds, leaning in, elbows on the table. "The ETs are all over the place. They've been flying around our skies for sixty-two years."

Bassett is Washington's only registered UFO lobbyist. He is in his early sixties but looks easily a decade younger: compactly built and straight-jawed, with slate-blue eyes set like marbles below a prominent brow, he still resembles the small-time tennis pro he once was. The director of the Bethesda-based Extraterrestrial Phenomena Political Action Committee, Bassett works on behalf of what he calls "the exopolitical disclosure movement," a subculture of UFO fanatics and researchers toiling to end what they believe is a government cover-up of the extraterrestrial presence on our planet. Although Bassett arguably represents a larger constituency than most K Street denizens—a third of Americans believe that aliens have visited earth, according to a recent Scripps Howard poll—he has scraped by on only an estimated $75,000 in outside contributions since 1996, plus about $200,000 of his own money he says he has poured into the cause. "If the civil rights movement had had to operate under these conditions," he says, "there'd still be separate bathrooms."

Bassett's PAC doesn't make campaign contributions, and Bassett rarely meets with congressmen, who are, he says, "deathly afraid to speak about" his issue. Instead, he has deluged the Hill with "congressional alerts," issued hundreds of thousands of press releases to news outlets across the country, and given perhaps a thousand speeches worldwide. "At the moment, Stephen is very, very active," says Alfred Webre, a founder of the "political science" of human/ET interactions. In fact, Bassett's Web site lists ninety-one radio and conference appearances in 2009 alone.

*Bassett works on behalf of the "exopolitical disclosure movement," a subculture of UFO fanatics toiling to end what they believe is a government cover-up of the extraterrestrial presence on our planet.*

Bassett thinks his tireless activism is finally paying off: he and others in the disclosure movement believe that Obama could be the answer to their prayers—the "disclosure president" they've been waiting for. If Obama doesn't announce the existence of aliens by early 2010, they say, he certainly will in the next few years. For one



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thing, there are Obama's ties to his transition team cochairman John Podesta (an *X-Files* buff who once declared that "it's time to open the books" on the government's UFO investigations) and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson (who told MSNBC in 2007 that while he doesn't believe in UFOs, "the federal government has not come clean" on the issue). In addition, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, and a stream of other nations have declassified heaps of UFO documents in recent years—a trend that disclosure advocates interpret as an international call for American transparency. There is also the "Rockefeller Initiative." From 1993 to 1996, Laurance Rockefeller, the billionaire grandson of John D. Rockefeller, repeatedly tried to convince Bill Clinton to declassify key UFO files, and his correspondence with the Clinton White House, Bassett believes, outs several Obama officials, including both Hillary Clinton and CIA Director Leon Panetta, as players with knowledge of the ET issue.

*Bassett arguably represents a larger constituency than most K Street denizens—a third of Americans believe that aliens have visited earth, according to a recent Scripps Howard poll.*

Bassett didn't devote his life to UFO lobbying until he was forty-nine, and he claims to have never had a paranormal experience of any kind. A onetime Georgia Tech physics undergrad who had intended to get a PhD before the tumult of Vietnam led him to march for civil rights and get "pretty good and fried," Bassett spent most of the seventies operating tennis clubs and playing in the sport's equivalent of the minor leagues, and he later got into penny stocks and business consulting. Arriving in middle age with no immediate family and no long-term friends, Bassett decided to devote himself to the ET cause. (He had been "almost certain, intellectually, that ETs were here" since the age of twenty.) In January of 1996 he began volunteering at the Program for Extraordinary Experience Research at the Harvard-affiliated Center for Psychology and Social Change, which was operated by John Mack, a controversial psychiatrist who researched the alien abduction phenomenon. Bassett relocated to Washington that July, telling a friend he would stay two weeks. But two weeks turned into five years; the disclosure issue, he concluded, "was getting ready to pop."

Like all good lobbyists, Bassett insists that his interests are perfectly aligned with the country's. Disclosure, he believes, is the key to America's continued global dominance: Obama will command international respect not only because of his moral courage but also because he will introduce "the common man's payoff"—ET technology. If you visit someone you don't know very well, Bassett explains, "you show up with a gift. Some wine, maybe some nice cheese. Well, if you're going to show up at a planet, and you're not their species, you had better be carrying a lot of gifts." Obama, he anticipates, will announce the existence of "ET physics," deduced from the workings of alien craft, that will solve the energy crisis and global warming, and the ETs themselves will shower us with antidotes to cancer and other diseases. But the government needs to act soon. "If China breaks the truth embargo tomorrow," says Bassett, "let me tell you something: the United States might as well just pack it up."

By "truth embargo," of course, Bassett means "cover-up," but he dislikes the latter term's connotation. This careful framing of the issue represents just a small part of his effort to "normalize" his cause. When he arrived in Washington, Bassett felt that any real political issue needed a lobby. There wasn't a lobbyist for ET disclosure, so he registered. Candidates weren't debating the issue during elections, so in 2002 Bassett got on the ballot in Maryland's 8th Congressional District and amassed about 1 percent of the vote. The disclosure movement needed an institutional home, so he created an advocacy organization called the Paradigm Research Group. It needed a conference, too, so he founded the X-Conference, which in 2009 was attended by about 300 people.

As the Bush administration drew to a close, Bassett hoped that the time for disclosure had come at last. The Cold War, during which disclosure could have inflamed American-Soviet relations, was a distant memory. In contrast to Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Barack Obama seemed on good terms with military intelligence officials—always a plus, since they're the ones sitting on the information. "He's also brilliant," Bassett says, "so he could handle the complexities of what disclosure is going to mean." There was also his international popularity—and his skin color. "If you're going to go to the world and say, 'We have been keeping from you the most profound information in history for six decades,' and it so happens that that world is predominantly brown, it might help a lot if the president who was telling them was brown," Bassett says. "These are significant assets, alright?"

Following the election, Bassett mounted a final push, which he plans to continue until disclosure: he calls it the "Million Fax on Washington." Calling on his network of advocates—the initiative's Facebook group has more than 1,000 members—Bassett began bombarding the Obama administration and the White House press corps with letters, faxes, and e-mails. What is notable, he adds, is that no one has admitted to receiving a single one of them—if they did, they would have to respond. "You see, they have no response," says Bassett. "We have them in the corner."

Lucky for us, Bassett thinks that when Obama finally introduces "our friends," they won't resemble the aliens in *Independence Day*. "They'll be real popular, real fast," he says. "Nobody'll have a bad thing to say about them. 'My mama just got cured by the ET tech! I love those ETs.'"

He pauses. "So that means the next three, five, six years are going to be pretty damn interesting." WM

**Daniel Fromson** is a former intern at the *Washington Monthly*.



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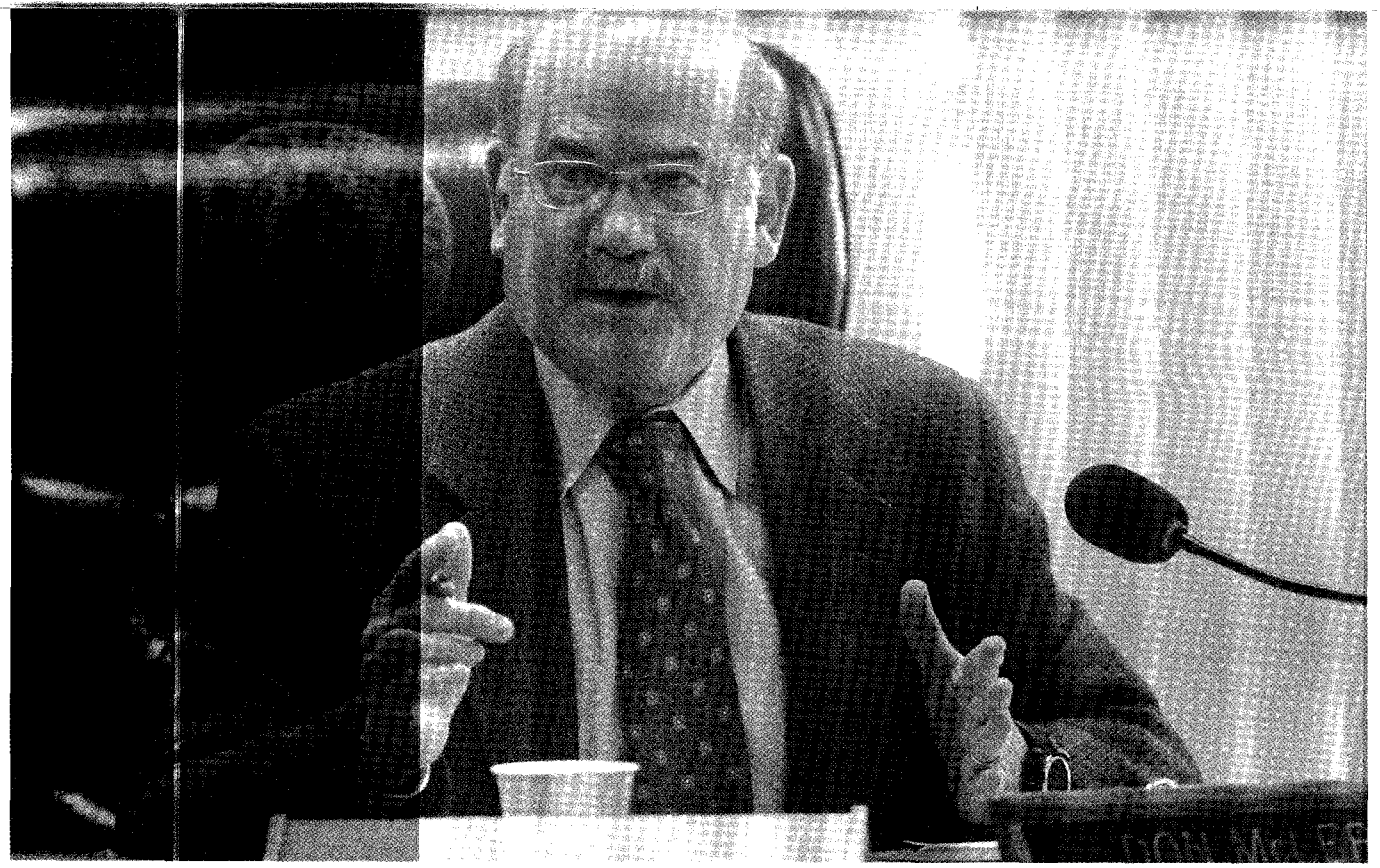

**On a mission from God:** Don McLeroy of the Texas State Board of Education in the board chambers.

Jana Birchum

# Revisionaries

## How a group of Texas conservatives are rewriting your kids' textbooks.

**By Mariah Blake**

Don McLeroy is a balding, paunchy man with a thick broom-handle mustache who lives in a rambling two-story brick home in a suburb near Bryan, Texas. When he greeted me at the door one evening last October, he was clutching a thin paperback with the skeleton of a seahorse on its cover, a primer on natural selection penned by famed evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr. We sat down at his dining table, which was piled high with three-ring binders, and his wife, Nancy, brought us ice water in cut-crystal glasses with matching coasters. Then McLeroy cracked the book open. The margins were littered with stars, exclamation points, and hundreds of yellow Post-its that were brimming with notes scrawled in a microscopic hand. With childlike glee, McLeroy flipped through the pages and explained what he saw as the gaping holes in Darwin's theory. "I don't care what the educational political lobby and their allies on the left say," he declared at one point. "Evolution is hooey." This bled into a rant about American history. "The secular humanists may argue that we are a secular nation," McLeroy said, jabbing his finger in the air for emphasis. "But we are a Christian nation founded on Christian principals. The way I evaluate history textbooks is first I see how they cover Christianity and Israel. Then I see how they treat Ronald Reagan—he needs to get credit for saving the world from communism and for the good economy over the last twenty years because he lowered taxes."

Views like these are relatively common in East Texas, a region that prides itself on being the buckle of the Bible Belt. But McLeroy is no ordinary citizen. The jovial creationist sits on the Texas State Board of Education, where he is one of the leaders of an activist bloc that holds enormous sway over the body's decisions. As the state goes through the once-in-a-decade process of rewriting the standards for its textbooks, the faction is using its clout to infuse them with ultraconservative ideals. Among other things, they aim to rehabilitate Joseph McCarthy, bring global-warming denial into science class, and downplay the contributions of the civil rights movement.

Battles over textbooks are nothing new, especially in Texas, where bitter skirmishes regularly erupt over everything from sex education to phonics and new math. But never before has the board's right wing wielded so much power over



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the writing of the state's standards. And when it comes to textbooks, what happens in Texas rarely stays in Texas. The reasons for this are economic: Texas is the nation's second-largest textbook market and one of the few biggies where the state picks what books schools can buy rather than leaving it up to the whims of local districts, which means publishers that get their books approved can count on millions of dollars in sales. As a result, the Lone Star State has outsized influence over the reading material used in classrooms nationwide, since publishers craft their standard textbooks based on the specs of the biggest buyers. As one senior industry executive told me, "Publishers will do whatever it takes to get on the Texas list."

Until recently, Texas's influence was balanced to some degree by the more-liberal pull of California, the nation's largest textbook market. But its economy is in such shambles that California has put off buying new books until at least 2014. This means that McLeroy and his ultraconservative crew have unparalleled power to shape the textbooks that children around the country read for years to come.

*Texas has outsized influence over what children across the nation read since publishers craft their standard textbooks based on the specs of the biggest buyers. "Publishers will do whatever it takes to get on the Texas list," says one industry executive.*

Up until the 1950s, textbooks painted American history as a steady string of triumphs, but the upheavals of the 1960s shook up old hierarchies, and beginning in the latter part of the decade, textbook publishers scrambled to rewrite their books to make more space for women and minorities. They also began delving more deeply into thorny issues, like slavery and American interventionism. As they did, a new image of America began to take shape that was not only more varied, but also far gloomier than the old one. Author Frances FitzGerald has called this chain of events "the most dramatic rewriting of history ever to take place."

This shift spurred a fierce backlash from social conservatives, and some began hunting for ways to fight back. In the 1960s, Norma and Mel Gabler, a homemaker and an oil-company clerk, discovered that Texas had a little-known citizen-review process that allowed the public to weigh in on textbook content. From their kitchen table in the tiny town of Hawkins, the couple launched a crusade to purge textbooks of what they saw as a liberal, secular, pro-evolution bias. When textbook adoptions rolled around, the Gablers would descend on school board meetings with long lists of proposed changes—at one point their aggregate "scroll of shame" was fifty-four feet long. They also began stirring up other social conservatives, and eventually came to wield breathtaking influence. By the 1980s, the board was demanding that publishers make hundreds of the Gablers' changes each cycle. These ranged from rewriting entire passages to simple fixes, such as pulling the New Deal from a timeline of significant historical events (the Gablers thought it smacked of socialism) and describing the Reagan administration's 1983 military intervention in Grenada as a "rescue" rather than an "invasion."

To avoid tangling with the Gablers and other citizen activists, many publishers started self-censoring or allowing the couple to weigh in on textbooks in advance. In 1984, the liberal advocacy group People for the American Way analyzed new biology textbooks presented for adoption in Texas and found that, even before the school board weighed in, three made no mention of evolution. At least two of them were later adopted in other states. This was not unusual: while publishers occasionally produced Texas editions, in most cases changes made to accommodate the state appeared in textbooks around the country—a fact that remains true to this day.

The Texas legislature finally intervened in 1995, after a particularly heated skirmish over health textbooks—among other things, the board demanded that publishers pull illustrations of techniques for breast self-examination and swap a photo of a briefcase-toting woman for one of a mother baking a cake. The adoption process was overhauled so that instead of being able to rewrite books willy-nilly, the school board worked with the Texas Education Agency, the state's department of education, to develop a set of standards. Any book that conformed and got the facts right had to be accepted, which diluted the influence of citizen activists.

Around this time, social conservatives decided to target seats on the school board itself. In 1994 the Texas Republican Party, which had just been taken over by the religious right, enlisted Robert Offutt, a conservative board member who was instrumental in overhauling the health textbooks, to recruit like-minded candidates to run against the board's moderate incumbents. At the same time, conservative donors began pouring tens of thousands of dollars into local school board races. Among them were Wal-Mart heir John Walton and James Leininger, a hospital-bed tycoon whose largess has been instrumental in allowing religious conservatives to take charge of the machinery of Texas politics. Conservative groups, like the Christian Coalition and the Eagle Forum, also jumped into the fray and began mobilizing voters.

Part of the newcomers' strategy was bringing bare-knuckle politics into what had been low-key local races. In the run-up to the 1994 election, Leininger's political action committee, Texans for Governmental Integrity, sent out glossy



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flyers suggesting that one Democratic incumbent—a retired Methodist schoolteacher and grandmother of five—was a pawn of the "radical homosexual lobby" who wanted to push steroids and alcohol on children and advocated in-class demonstrations on "how to masturbate and how to get an abortion!" The histrionics worked, and the group quickly picked off a handful of Democrats. The emboldened bloc then set its sights on Republicans who refused to vote in lockstep. "Either you'd hippity-hop, or they would throw whatever they could at you," says Cynthia A. Thornton, a conservative Republican and former board member, who refers to the bloc as "the radicals."

It took more than a decade of fits and starts, but the strategy eventually paid off. After the 2006 election, Republicans claimed ten of fifteen board seats. Seven were held by the ultraconservatives, and one by a close ally, giving them an effective majority. Among the new cadre were some fiery ideologues; in her self-published book, Cynthia Dunbar of Richmond rails against public education, which she dubs "tyrannical" and a "tool of perversion," and says sending kids to public school is like "throwing them into the enemy's flames." (More recently, she has accused Barack Obama of being a terrorist sympathizer and suggested he wants America to be attacked so he can declare martial law.) Then in 2007 Governor Rick Perry appointed Don McLeroy, a suburban dentist and longstanding bloc member, as board chairman. This passing of the gavel gave the faction unprecedented power just as the board was gearing up for the once-in-a-decade process of rewriting standards for every subject.

McLeroy has flexed his muscle particularly brazenly in the struggle over social studies standards. When the process began last January, the Texas Education Agency assembled a team to tackle each grade. In the case of eleventh-grade U.S. history, the group was made up of classroom teachers and history professors—that is, until McLeroy added a man named Bill Ames. Ames—a volunteer with the ultraconservative Eagle Forum and Minuteman militia member who occasionally publishes angry screeds accusing "illegal immigrant aliens" of infesting America with diseases or blasting the "environmentalist agenda to destroy America"—pushed to infuse the standards with his right-wing views and even managed to add a line requiring books to give space to conservative icons, "such as Newt Gingrich, Phyllis Schlafly and the Moral Majority," without any liberal counterweight. But for the most part, the teachers on the team refused to go along. So Ames put in a call to McLeroy, who demanded to see draft standards for every grade and then handed them over to the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank founded by his benefactor, James Leininger. The group combed through the papers and compiled a list of seemingly damning omissions. Among other things, its analysts claimed that the writing teams had stripped out key historical figures like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Pat Hardy, a Republican board member who has sat in on some of the writing-team meetings, insists this isn't true. "No one was trying to remove George Washington!" she says. "That group took very preliminary, unfinished documents and drew all kinds of wrongheaded conclusions."

Nevertheless, the allegations drummed up public outrage, and in April the board voted to stop the writing teams' work and bring in a panel of experts to guide the process going forward—"expert," in this case, meaning any person on whom two board members could agree. In keeping with the makeup of the board, three of the six people appointed were right-wing ideologues, among them Peter Marshall, a Massachusetts-based preacher who has argued that California wildfires and Hurricane Katrina were God's punishment for tolerating gays, and David Barton, former vice chairman of the Texas Republican Party. Both men are self-styled historians with no relevant academic training—Barton's only credential is a bachelor's degree in religious education from Oral Roberts University—who argue that the wall of separation between church and state is a myth.

*The ultraconservatives sent out flyers suggesting that one Democratic incumbent—a retired Methodist schoolteacher and grandmother of five—was a pawn of the "radical homosexual lobby" who advocated in-class demonstrations on "how to masturbate and how to get an abortion!"*

When the duo testified before the board in September, Barton, a lanky man with a silver pompadour, brought along several glass display cases stuffed with rare documents that illustrate America's Christian heritage, among them a battered leather Bible that was printed by the Congress of the Confederation in 1782, a scrap of yellowing paper with a biblical poem scrawled by John Quincy Adams, and a stack of rusty printing plates for McGuffey Readers, popular late-1800s school books with a strong Christian bent. When he took to the podium that afternoon, Barton flashed a PowerPoint slide showing thick metal chains. "I really like the analogy of a chain—that we have all these chains that run through American history," he explained in his rapid-fire twang. But, he added, in the draft social studies standards, the governmental history



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# Money and Power on the Texas State Board of Education

The ultraconservative faction on the Texas state school board owes its breathtaking clout largely to one man: Rick Agosto, a San Antonio Democrat who regularly votes with the group, giving it the paper-thin majority it needs to push its agenda forward. Why does he do it? Some fellow board members chalk it up to vote swapping.

Their allegations hinge on a recent deal involving the $22 billion Permanent School Fund, which is overseen by the board and provides nontax funding for the state's public schools. At Agosto's urging, the faction voted last summer to fire the fund's chief outside investment adviser and bring in a firm called New England Pension Consultants. This baffled some of their colleagues. After all, the Texas department of education had found that NEPC was the less-qualified firm, and its original bid was roughly $1 million a year—more than twice what the competition was asking. "The whole thing stunk," recalls Republican board member Pat Hardy.

*Cynthia A. Thornton, a seventy-year-old former schoolteacher and stalwart Republican who raises donkeys on a farm near Round Top, Texas, believes some faction members have a genuine interest in education. For others she argues "that's just the smoke that covers the shady business."*

In the run-up to the vote, six senior government staffers who manage the fund's day-to-day operations refused to sign routine disclosure statements vouching for the ethical integrity of the deal. It has since come to light that Agosto, who does marketing for institutional investment firms, was courting NEPC as a client, which has raised suspicions among the board's dissenters—not to mention Lone Star pundits—about his motives for steering business to the firm. (Agosto declined to be interviewed, but he issued a statement saying, "I have never knowingly received an improper benefit in connection with my role on the Board.")

The ordeal echoes another scandal, which began in 1995 when the board, led by members of the ultraconservative bloc, ignored advice from the fund's staff and parceled part of its assets out to dozens of money managers (one of them Agosto's former employer). Investigations by the Texas State Auditor's Office later found that this opened the system to conflicts of interest and self-dealing, and that companies with links to some bloc members were handed lucrative contracts. Allegations of pay-for-play and influence peddling abounded, though a grand jury probe failed to turn up proof of criminal wrongdoing. The arrangement was costly for Texas schoolchildren: once the $130 million in money managers' fees were deducted, the value of the fund plunged by $57 million between 1995 and 2004. At the same time, the stock market as a whole roughly doubled in value.

The board finally began shedding money managers in 2003, after a group of reformers were voted on. Among them was Cynthia A. Thornton, a seventy-year-old former schoolteacher and stalwart Republican who raises donkeys on a farm near Round Top, Texas. Like the bloc's members, she opposes sex education, believes schools should display the Ten Commandments, and pooh-poohs evolution—as she told me, "There is no way humans crawled out of some pond." But during her tenure on the board, from 2000 to 2006, she sparred with them so viciously that armed police started attending board meetings and escorting her to and from her car. While Thornton believes some faction members have a genuine interest in education, for others she argues "that's just the smoke that covers the shady business."

—*Mariah Blake*



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chain was riddled with gaps. "We don't mention 1638, the first written constitution in America ... the predecessor to the U.S. Constitution," he noted as a hot pink "1638" popped up on the screen. By this he meant the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, which called for a government based on the "Rule of the Word of God." Barton proceeded to rattle off roughly a dozen other documents that pointed up the theocratic leaning of early American society, as the years appeared in orange or pink along the length of the chain.

Barton's goal is to pack textbooks with early American documents that blend government and religion, and paint them as building blocks of our Constitution. In so doing, he aims to blur the fact that the Constitution itself cements a wall of separation between church and state. But his agenda does not stop there. He and the other conservative experts also want to scrub U.S. history of its inconvenient blemishes—if they get their way, textbooks will paint slavery as a relic of British colonialism that America struggled to cast off from day one and refer to our economic system as "ethical capitalism." They also aim to redeem Communist hunter Joseph McCarthy, a project McLeroy endorses. As he put it in a memo to one of the writing teams, "Read the latest on McCarthy—He was basically vindicated."

On the global front, Barton and company want textbooks to play up clashes with Islamic cultures, particularly where Muslims were the aggressors, and to paint them as part of an ongoing battle between the West and Muslim extremists. Barton argues, for instance, that the Barbary wars, a string of skirmishes over piracy that pitted America against Ottoman vassal states in the 1800s, were the "original war against Islamic Terrorism." What's more, the group aims to give history a pro-Republican slant—the most obvious example being their push to swap the term "democratic" for "republican" when describing our system of government. Barton, who was hired by the GOP to do outreach to black churches in the run-up to the 2004 election, has argued elsewhere that African Americans owe their civil rights almost entirely to Republicans and that, given the "atrocious" treatment blacks have gotten at the hands of Democrats, "it might be much more appropriate that ... demands for reparations were made to the Democrat Party rather than to the federal government." He is trying to shoehorn this view into textbooks, partly by shifting the focus of black history away from the civil rights era to the post-Reconstruction period, when blacks were friendlier with Republicans.

Barton and Peter Marshall initially tried to purge the standards of key figures of the civil rights era, such as César Chávez and Thurgood Marshall, though they were forced to back down amid a deafening public uproar. They have since resorted to a more subtle tack; while they concede that people like Martin Luther King Jr. deserve a place in history, they argue that they shouldn't be given credit for advancing the rights of minorities. As Barton put it, "Only majorities can expand political rights in America's constitutional society." Ergo, any rights people of color have were handed to them by whites—in his view, mostly white Republican men.

While the writing teams have so far made only modest concessions to the ideologue experts, the board has final say over the documents' contents, and the ultraconservative bloc has made it clear that it wants its experts' views to get prominent play—a situation the real experts find deeply unsettling. While in Texas, I paid a visit to James Kracht, a soft-spoken professor with a halo of fine white hair, who is a dean at Texas A&M University's school of education. Kracht oversaw the writing of Texas's social studies standards in the 1990s and is among the experts tapped by the board's moderates this time around. I asked him how he thought the process was going. "I have to be careful what I say," he replied, looking vaguely sheepish. "But when the door is closed and I'm by myself, I yell and scream and pound on the wall."

*One of the history "experts" picked by the board is a former vice chair of the Texas Republican Party whose only academic credential is a bachelor's in religious education from Oral Roberts University. He wants textbooks to swap "democratic" for "republican" when describing our system of government.*

There has already been plenty of screaming and wall pounding in the battles over standards for other subjects. In late 2007, the English language arts writing teams, made up mostly of teachers and curriculum planners, turned in the drafts they had been laboring over for more than two years. The ultraconservatives argued that they were too light on basics like grammar and too heavy on reading comprehension and critical thinking. "This critical-thinking stuff is gobbledygook," grumbled David Bradley, an insurance salesman with no college degree, who often acts as the faction's enforcer. At the bloc's urging, the board threw out the teams' work and hired an outside consultant to craft new standards from scratch, but the faction still wasn't satisfied; when the new drafts came in, one adherent dismissed them as "unreadable" and "mangled." In the end, they took matters into their own hands. The night before the final vote in May 2008, two



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members of the bloc, Gail Lowe and Barbara Cargill, met secretly and cobbled together yet another version. The documents were then slipped under their allies' hotel-room doors, and the bloc forced through a vote the following morning before the other board members even had a chance to read them. Bradley argued that the whole ordeal was necessary because the writing teams had clung to their own ideas rather than deferring to the board. "I don't think this will happen again, because they got spanked," he added.

A similar scenario played out during the battle over science standards, which reached a crescendo in early 2009. Despite the overwhelming consensus among scientists that climate change exists, the group rammed through a last-minute amendment requiring students to "analyze and evaluate different views on the existence of global warming." This, in essence, mandates the teaching of climate-change denial. What's more, they scrubbed the standards of any reference to the fact that the universe is roughly fourteen billion years old, because this timeline conflicts with biblical accounts of creation.

*"Whoo-eey! We won the Grand Slam, and the Super Bowl, and the World Cup! Our science standards are light years ahead of any other state when it comes to challenging evolution!" boasts one board member of the new standards for science textbooks.*

McLeroy and company had also hoped to require science textbooks to address the "strengths and weaknesses" of scientific theories, including evolution. Scientists see the phrase, which was first slipped into Texas curriculum standards in the 1980s, as a back door for bringing creationism into science class. But as soon as news broke that the board was considering reviving it, letters began pouring in from scientists around the country, and science professors began turning out en masse to school board hearings. During public testimony, one biologist arrived at the podium in a Victorian-era gown, complete with a flouncy pink bustle, to remind her audience that in the 1800s religious fundamentalists rejected the germ theory of disease; it has since gained near-universal acceptance. All this fuss made the bloc's allies skittish, and when the matter finally went to the floor last March, it failed by a single vote.

But the struggle did not end there. McLeroy piped up and chided his fellow board members, saying, "Somebody's gotta stand up to [these] experts!" He and his allies then turned around and put forward a string of amendments that had much the same effect as the "strengths and weaknesses" language. Among other things, they require students to evaluate various explanations for gaps in the fossil record and weigh whether natural selection alone can account for the complexity of cells. This mirrors the core arguments of the intelligent design movement: that life is too complex to be the result of unguided evolution, and that the fossil evidence for evolution between species is flimsy. The amendments passed by a wide margin, something McLeroy counts as a coup. "Whoo-eey!" he told me. "We won the Grand Slam, and the Super Bowl, and the World Cup! Our science standards are light years ahead of any other state when it comes to challenging evolution!" Scientists are not so enthusiastic. My last night in Texas, I met David Hillis, a MacArthur Award–winning evolutionary biologist who advised the board on the science standards, at a soul-food restaurant in Austin. "Clearly, some board members just wanted something they could point to so they could reject science books that don't give a nod to creationism," he said, stabbing his okra with a fork. "If they are able to use those standards to reject science textbooks, they have won and science has lost."

Even in deeply conservative Texas, the bloc's breathtaking hubris—coupled with allegations of vote swapping (see "Money and Power on the Texas State Board of Education," page 16)—have spurred a backlash. In May, the Texas state legislature refused to confirm McLeroy as board chair (Governor Perry replaced him with another bloc member), and, for the first time since he took office in 1998, he is facing a primary fight. His challenger, Thomas Ratliff, a lobbyist and legislative consultant whose father was the state's lieutenant governor, argues that under McLeroy's leadership the board has become a "liability" to the Republican Party. Two other members of the ultraconservative bloc are also mired in heated primary battles.

But to date few bloc members have been ousted in primaries, and even if moderates manage to peel off a few seats, by that time it will probably be too late. In mid-January, the board will meet to hammer out the last details of the standards for social studies, the only remaining subject, and the final vote will be held in March, around the same time the first primary ballots are counted. This means that no matter what happens at the ballot box, the next generation of textbooks will likely bear the fingerprints of the board's ultraconservatives—which is just fine with McLeroy. "Remember Superman?" he asked me, as we sat sipping ice water in his dining room. "The never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way? Well, that fight is still going on. There are people out there who want to replace truth with political correctness. Instead of the American way they want multiculturalism. We plan to fight back—and, when it comes to textbooks, we have the power to do it. Sometimes it boggles my mind the kind of power we have." WM

**Mariah Blake** is an editor of the *Washington Monthly*.



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Getty Images

# The Party of Obama

## What are the president's grass roots good for?

**By Charles Homans**

In David Plouffe's campaign memoir, *The Audacity to Win*, Barack Obama's victory happens the way explosions happen in the more lyrical action movies: there is a moment of silent suspended animation, and then the roar. Plouffe, Obama's campaign manager, meets the new president in his suite at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Chicago, just as Obama gets off the phone with President Bush, who has called to congratulate him. "I suddenly noticed how quiet the room seemed," Plouffe writes. "An outside observer might not have immediately known if we had won or lost the election." As Obama and his entourage pile into the motorcade to greet the crowds in Grant Park, Plouffe is still checking the western states' returns on his BlackBerry. It doesn't quite seem to have happened.

The principal architects of Obama's win were Plouffe and campaign adviser David Axelrod, and if Axelrod's handiwork—the shaping of the candidate and his message—was visible at the time, it took somewhat longer for outsiders to grasp the full scope of Plouffe's accomplishment, the technical workings of the campaign itself. Plouffe was press shy throughout the campaign, and came across in the few interviews he did give as almost studiously bland, like a particularly talented manager of a suburban Best Buy franchise. (He's even from Delaware.) But Plouffe's low-key act wasn't entirely incidental; the structure he built benefited from appearing not to have an architect.

The Obama campaign, Plouffe insists in nearly every chapter of his book, was built by, and for, the people. And to a real degree, it was. By November 4, Obama for America had 2 million active volunteers and nearly 4 million small donors, more than any previous Democratic campaign. With my.barackobama.com, the campaign's online hub, organizers could make more effective use of its grass roots than any candidate ever had. Local volunteers could organize and plan events without anyone in Chicago lifting a finger. By Election Day, the campaign's e-mail list of self-selected Obama supporters numbered 13 million addresses. With the click of a mouse, Plouffe could reach a group of true believers the size of the population of Illinois.



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That list—by the time Obama took office in January, what was going to happen to it was the million-dollar question. It was a tool that no previous president had had—except that, legally, the White House couldn't have it. So after some deliberation, Obama and his organizers decided to move the whole shop into the Democratic National Committee, renaming it Organizing for America and tweaking its mission: the organization that helped Obama win as a candidate would now be tasked with helping him succeed as a president. The speculation commenced immediately. In a profile of Plouffe—the man who "Changed Politics Forever"—in *Esquire*, Lisa Taddeo wrote, "If Obama has a policy initiative he wants to push, or a message he needs to disseminate, or a gaffe he wants to bat down, he will call David Plouffe and Plouffe will unleash the many-million-mouthed dog, just as he did all across America for these past two years."

*By the time Obama took office in January, the million-dollar question was what would happen to his list of 13 million campaign supporter e-mails. It was a tool that no previous president had had—except that, legally, the White House couldn't have it.*

That was the idea, anyway. But then Plouffe, whose daughter was born two days after the election, went into private consulting. The rest of the campaign's inner circle mostly moved into administration jobs, leaving OFA in the hands of their thirtysomething protégés. And the organization that was supposed to change everything has—well, not changed much at all.

It isn't that OFA hasn't done anything—it's that it's hard to say whether what it's done has actually mattered. When Congress debated the stimulus package, OFA asked its members to host house parties and collect stories—ultimately some 31,000 of them—about how the economic crisis was affecting them. The bill passed, but you would've had to squint awfully hard to see OFA's fingerprints on the final product. As the climate and health care bills advanced through the House, OFA sent out informational e-mails to its members and ran a television commercial urging viewers to call their congressmen and ask them to support health care reform—until the congressmen (who weren't named in the ads) complained to the White House. OFA obliged, and the next round of ads praised lawmakers who were doing the right thing; "Even if they aren't 100 percent on board, we're asking our folks to thank our members," OFA Executive Director Mitch Stewart told the *New York Times*. In August, as conservative tea partiers descended on lawmakers' town halls, OFA belatedly mobilized members to provide moral support at Democrats' events, but shied away from Republicans'.

As summer faded into fall, OFA began to receive harsh reviews from progressives, who argued that an organization that could have redefined liberal activism for a new generation had instead been squandered on what was essentially a prolonged PR mission. In an August 30 *Washington Post* op-ed titled "We Have the Hope. Now Where's the Audacity?" veteran organizers Peter Dreier and Marshall Ganz contended that OFA had "failed to keep up" with Obama's legislative agenda, and chastised the group for spending time on community service projects rather than bare-knuckle pursuit of policy victories. That criticism, in particular, must have stung; Ganz, a onetime acolyte of César Chávez and a legendary theorist of community organizing, had mentored members of OFA's brain trust, and conducted training workshops for Obama's volunteers during the campaign.

Finally, on October 20, OFA made its first big move: a national "day of action" on health care reform, on which the organization's members made—or pledged to make; the numbers OFA has released don't distinguish—more than 315,000 calls to members of Congress, asking lawmakers to pass Obama's health care plan. But once again, the callers' pitch was short on specifics—you had to dig deep on OFA's Web site to find any mention of the public health insurance option that liberals (and, according to CBS News polling, most Americans) wanted to see included in the bill. And the volume of calls, while impressive, fell short of overwhelming; with less than 3 million members, MoveOn was able to make that many calls to voters on a single afternoon in early 2004.

As the health care debate continued through November, MoveOn ran hard-hitting ad campaigns for the public option in Arkansas and Maine, the homes, respectively, of Blue Dog Democratic and moderate Republican lawmakers who would determine the fate of the bill in the Senate. OFA, meanwhile, sent out an e-mail plea to its members asking them for help raising $500,000 to counteract the "misinformation" Sarah Palin was spreading about Obama's health care plan on her book tour. Whatever OFA did with such donations, it had no noticeable impact on public perception of the president's handling of health care, which barely budged (downward) in the polls in the weeks after OFA kicked into high gear.

Could OFA have done a better job of helping pass these bills? Maybe, but it's hard to see how. On health care, for instance, the thing that OFA could theoretically do—drum up public support for the general idea of health care reform—didn't really need doing; reform of one sort or another re-



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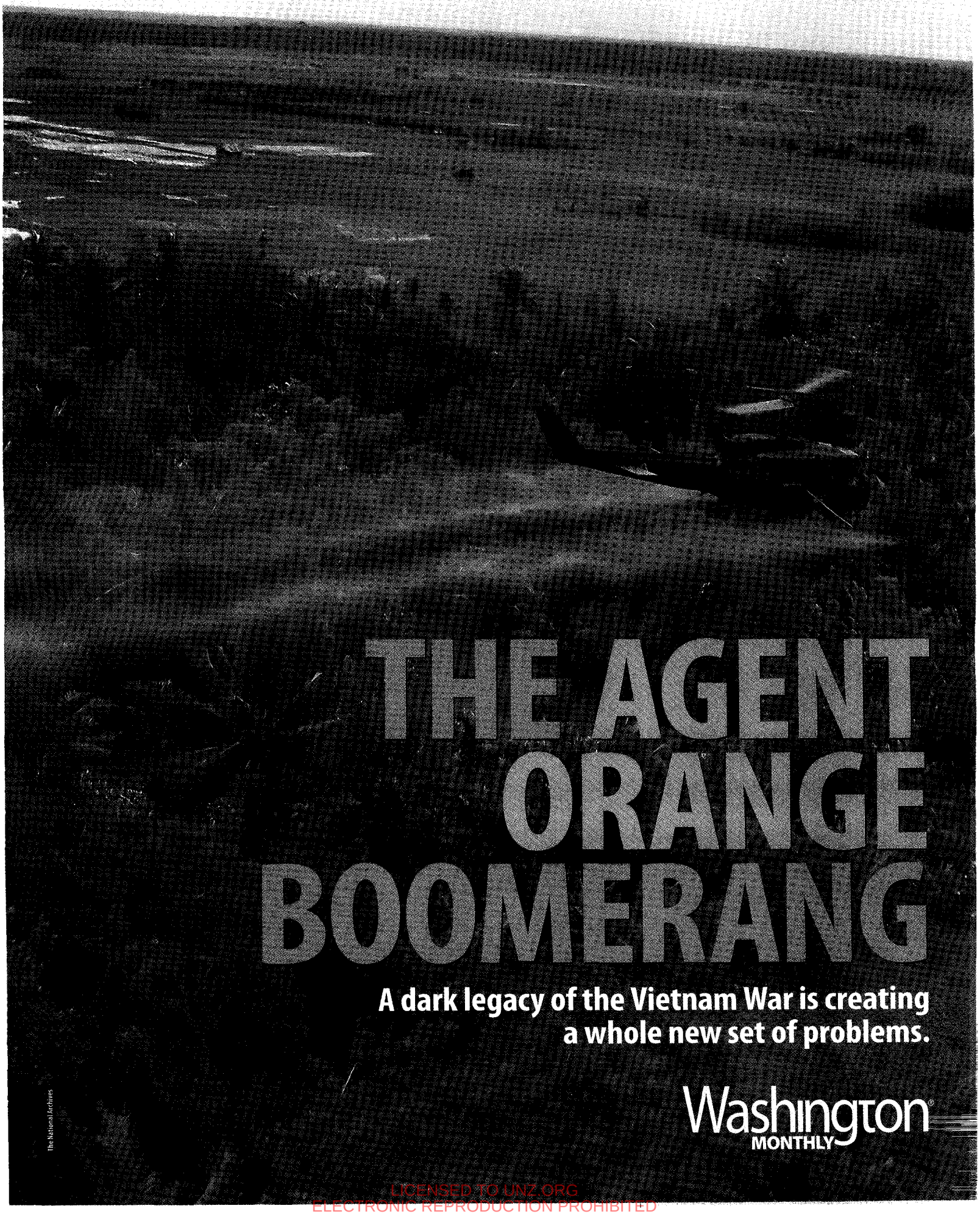
A SPECIAL REPORT



# THE AGENT ORANGE BOOMERANG

**A dark legacy of the Vietnam War is creating a whole new set of problems.**

The National Archives

Washington MONTHLY

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This special report was made possible by the generous support of the Ford Foundation.

**Editor:** Paul Glastris
**Publisher:** Diane Straus Tucker
**Cover photo:** The National Archives

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# INTRODUCTION: A LEGACY REVISITED

## Agent Orange is still damaging lives in Vietnam. The time has come for America to act.

**By Walter Isaacson**

A few years ago, I found myself at the storied Da Nang Airport, once a main U.S. air base in Vietnam, with my colleague from the Aspen Institute, Bill Mayer. Bill had been an Air Force pilot during the war, flying military supplies into Da Nang and bringing back, in the cargo bays of his C-124s, the coffins of fallen American soldiers. At Da Nang we met Bui The Giang, a top Communist Party official who, during the war, had served in a North Vietnamese antiaircraft battalion. Whether Giang had ever taken a shot at one of Bill's planes was a subject of speculation between the two old soldiers. That their conversation was friendly and relaxed was a sign, I thought, of just how far the U.S. and Vietnam have come since the two countries normalized diplomatic relations nearly fifteen years ago.

Bill and I were there as part of the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin, which I cochair. The aim of our binational and nonpartisan committee is to marshal support for resolving one of the Vietnam War's last legacies and an abiding irritant to an increasingly valuable U.S. ally and trading partner. From 1962 to 1971, America sprayed close to 20 million gallons of the herbicide Agent Orange across the region, to defoliate dense jungle in order to better detect movement of personnel and equipment from north to south, and to destroy enemy crops. That spraying left behind a residue of dioxin, a persistent and highly toxic chemical that can both shorten the life of humans exposed to it and potentially degrade the health of future generations. At Da Nang, a major storage site for Agent Orange during the war, large quantities of the chemical leaked into the surrounding land and water. As we walked the barren ground with other members of our delegation—former EPA chief Christine Todd Whitman, the Ford Foundation's then President Susan Berresford, Professor Vo Quy of Hanoi University, and Vietnam National Assembly member Ton Nu Thi Ninh—we stopped by a lake where the locals can no longer fish because of the dioxin pollution. At the very least, we resolved, we should begin by containing and then cleaning up the toxic waste that America left behind on this famous site.

The Vietnamese government claims that several million of its citizens suffer from health effects due to this chemical—from muscular and skeletal disorders to such birth defects as mental retardation. On our trip we witnessed heartbreaking scenes in Thai Binh Province, far from the war zone, where an estimated 10,000 disabled children and grandchildren were born to veterans of the conflict. Many had stunted limbs or curved spines, and they were working hard at the physical training that would be necessary for them to enter the workforce or take care of themselves. Science has demonstrated links between dioxin and many, if not all, of these medical conditions. However, it is almost impossible to establish direct causal connections between individual sufferers and their possible exposure to Agent Orange.

What to think and do about the complicated problem of Agent Orange's long-term damage is the subject of this special report put together by the *Washington Monthly*. In "Agent of Influence" (page A3), Joshua Kurlantzick and Geoffrey Cain explore the tricky scientific and diplomatic terrain of this issue and argue that there are compelling



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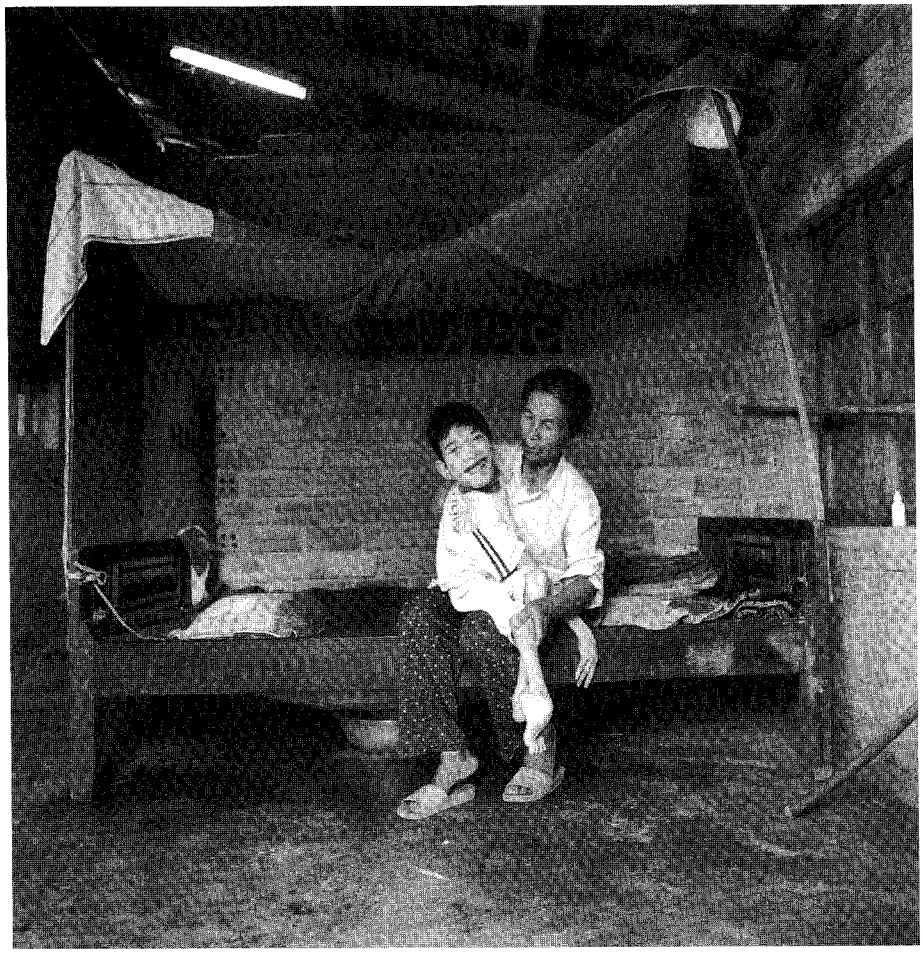
geostrategic reasons for the United States to engage in resolving it. In "The Environmental Consequences of War" (page A8), Clay Risen looks at the broader question of how and why other nations have—or, more often, have not—taken responsibility for ameliorating the environmental and health consequences of their actions in past wars. And in "A Hard Way to Die" (page A12), Phillip Longman brings the topic home, with a report on why, after years of effort, the U.S. government is still not providing American veterans exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam with the care they need and deserve.

Fortunately, the hard work of overcoming the legacy of Agent Orange has begun. In 2006, U.S. President George W. Bush and Vietnam President Nguyen Minh Triet agreed to undertake cooperative efforts to stop further leaks from the old Agent Orange storage sites. In 2007, Congress appropriated $3 million for the cleanup of dioxin in and around Da Nang and for health programs in surrounding communities, with $3 million more provided in the 2009 and 2010 budgets. Now that the U.S. government has established the precedent of helping, the Obama administration can and should move more forcefully toward finally solving this problem. In addition, the Ford Foundation has donated its own funds to help at the Da Nang Airport and in other affected areas.

America's foreign policy has always been motivated by both our nation's ideals and its strategic interests. Helping to resolve the Agent Orange issue would serve both. Vietnam has become a key strategic and economic partner, with a citizenry that is very supportive of American interests. By helping to clean up what we left behind, we would be displaying our basic decency and values as a people. In doing so, we might provide some closure, both for ourselves and for the Vietnamese, to a long-ago war and its lingering legacies. WM

**Walter Isaacson**, president and CEO of the Aspen Institute, is cochair of the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin, which is supported by the Ford Foundation. His most recent books are *Einstein: His Life and Universe* and *American Sketches: Great Leaders, Creative Thinkers, and Heroes of a Hurricane*.

Petronella J. Ytsma



**Near Da Nang, Nguyen Thi Xuan cares for her twenty-five-year-old son, Nguyen Duc Tu, who cannot walk, sit up, or speak due to birth defects authorities believe were caused by Agent Orange.**

# AGENT OF INFLUENCE

## The realpolitik case for compensating Vietnam.

**By Geoffrey Cain and Joshua Kurlantzick**

Anh Nguyen Khanh, a motorbike driver in the mountains outside Da Nang, a city in southern Vietnam, is only fifty-three, but he looks much older. His fourteen-year-old son was born with severe spina bifida and cannot walk; his seventeen-year-old daughter has Down's syndrome. His wife, shattered by her two children's hardships, has become so mentally unstable she must be restrained at times. "Life is the hardest thing," says Anh Khanh, who supports his family by transporting vegetables between villages, earning about $100 per month. "This [life] is truly a curse."

As a child during the Vietnam War, Anh Khanh remembers watching as American forces sprayed the area around his home with Agent Orange, a defoliant containing the chemical dioxin and used by U.S. forces to kill plants and expose enemy movement. "I remember seeing the



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American warplanes dropping some sort of chemical on the jungles," he says. "We thought everything was okay, because they weren't dropping bombs ... It wasn't until the 1980s, when our generation started having children, that we learned the horrible effects of war would follow us our entire lives." Today, Anh Khanh, like many Vietnamese, is convinced that the remnants of dioxin, a poison, in his village's soil have destroyed his family, causing his children's birth defects, which then ruined his wife's mental health. The local government, he says, has little money to help him, and offers just $15 per month in benefits, only enough to cover a portion of the food and health care costs of one of his two children. "God is watching over us," he says. "That's our only hope."

During the Vietnam War, the United States sprayed as much as 18 million gallons of Agent Orange on the country, according to a Government Accountability Office study. Decades later, the long-acting toxin continues to exact a terrible toll on the people of Vietnam. While the U.S. insists that there is not enough evidence to link the spraying of the defoliant to any illnesses in Vietnam, the government in Hanoi estimates that as many as 400,000 Vietnamese have died early from ailments related to exposure to dioxin and that 500,000 children have birth defects because of exposure to the chemicals leeching into water and soil.

Until recently, the lingering effects of Agent Orange were not something the Vietnamese government talked much about. After normalizing relations with Washington in 1995, Hanoi's overwhelming goal was to win favorable trade deals with the United States and admission into global bodies like the World Trade Organization; bringing up unpleasant subjects like Agent Orange worked against that strategy. But having attained those goals a few years ago, the government is now becoming more aggressive in pressing its claims. "Vietnam feels more confident in where it stands with the U.S., so now it can go back to some of these war issues," says Edmund Malesky, a Vietnam expert at the University of California, San Diego. At the annual meeting of Vietnamese and American government representatives to an Agent Orange task force, held last September, Vietnam's deputy minister of natural resources and environment, Nguyen Xuan Cuong, declared that U.S. assistance in Agent Orange cleanup thus far "has not met our expectations."

Despite pressure from Vietnam, the U.S. has steadfastly refused to acknowledge any American responsibility for tragedies like the family of Anh Khanh. In part this is because the United States is under no compelling legal obligation to compensate Vietnam. Attempts by Vietnamese plaintiffs to win damages in American courts have repeatedly failed; international laws and treaties regarding the environmental and health consequences of war are weak and largely unenforceable. And while there is sound medical evidence linking dioxin exposure to an ever-wider variety of illnesses, proving causation in individual cases in Vietnam is nearly impossible. But the biggest reason why the U.S. refuses to take responsibility for the effects of Agent Orange in Vietnam is one of precedent: doing so, defense officials insist, would open Washington up to claims from Koreans, Filipinos, Iraqis, and anyone else impacted by the actions of U.S. armed forces.

**With its proximity to and historical animosity toward China, Vietnam has the potential to be a pivotal U.S. ally in one of the most dangerous regions in the world.**

Yet for all these difficulties, Washington should help pay for the damage done by Agent Orange in Vietnam, because in this case our moral concerns coincide with our strategic ones. Though most Americas still see Vietnam through the eyes of the war, endlessly chronicled in books and films, average Vietnamese citizens have moved on. "The past is closed," says Tien Nam Tran, professor of international relations at Vietnam National University. "Vietnamese people do not see Americans as rivals from the previous war." Rather, Vietnam has become one of the most pro-American countries in Asia. With its proximity to and historical animosity toward China, it also has the potential to be a pivotal ally in one of the most dangerous regions of the world. And with China winning allies across Asia, the U.S. badly needs friends like these. That's an argument even the hardest-core national security hawks in Washington ought to listen to.

During the early years of the Vietnam War, Agent Orange was not a major tool in the American arsenal, but as North Vietnam's army and the Viet Cong proved successful at using the jungle to hide men and materiel, the spraying of defoliant became central to American war fighting. The Vietnamese government estimates that the U.S. sprayed roughly 12,000 square miles of Vietnam, around 10 percent of the country's total area. Meanwhile, in areas like Da Nang, home to a major U.S. air base, American forces stored large amounts of dioxin, some of which ultimately leaked out of storage containers. One study by the Hatfield Consultants, a prominent environmental analysis firm, suggested that the soil around Da Nang today contains up to 365 times the acceptable international standard of dioxin.

Hoang Thi The, a seventy-one-year-old widow once married to a Viet Cong officer, lives in Da Nang. She cares for two grown children who suffer from severe handicaps: her son was born with deformed limbs, while her daughter is deaf, mute, and paralyzed—problems caused, a local doctor told her, by dioxin. The children spend every day lying on wooden beds at home, staring at the walls. "In the past, we had a lot of money, and we went everywhere around Vietnam to find a treatment [for their ailments]," she says. "But no treatment came. Now we have nothing. I worry what will happen to my children when I die."

For years, the evidence appeared inconclusive on Agent Orange's links to diseases. But in recent decades, medical re-



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search, much of it focused on American veterans of the Vietnam War, has shown dioxin to be a risk factor in an ever-growing number of illnesses. The list includes Parkinson's disease, Hodgkin's disease, ischemic heart disease, leukemia, prostate cancer, and (in children of those exposed to the chemical) birth defects such as spina bifida and clubfoot. Nor is there much doubt that many Vietnamese are carrying around dangerous amounts of the toxin in their bodies. One analysis of more than 3,000 Vietnamese, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, found far higher levels of dioxin in their blood than among people who'd lived in unsprayed areas.

Yet figuring out exactly who in Vietnam has been exposed to how much dioxin is extremely difficult. Despite some records kept by the U.S. Army, no one knows exactly how much Agent Orange was sprayed in different parts of the country. And as one comprehensive Congressional Research Service study notes, "Both the South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese governments were not keeping detailed troop deployment information," making it hard to prove who fought in the sprayed areas.

Even Vietnamese health officials admit they cannot necessarily tell, in a poor country where most ailments go untreated, which handicaps actually stem from exposure to dioxin. "We have a very limited budget, and we cannot be certain who is an Agent Orange victim and who is not," says Phan Thanh Tien, who works at the Da Nang Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin, a government-funded nonprofit. "When a family with a handicapped child comes to us, we must ask, 'Where do you live?' If they live in an area that was sprayed heavily, or has contaminated water, we assume they are Agent Orange victims." Indeed, few organizations in Vietnam have the money to run a definitive test for dioxin exposure. (It costs roughly $1,000 to test one person's level of dioxin exposure, and per capita GDP in Vietnam is only $2,600.) Vietnamese domestic politics also plays a role in claims. As Phan Thanh Tien admits, families of veterans who fought on the side of North Vietnam during the war receive more government compensation for suspected Agent Orange–related illnesses than everybody else.

Even if Vietnam could definitively determine who was affected by Agent Orange, however, the Pentagon would still worry that admitting responsibility and providing money for victims would set a dangerous precedent. The U.S. government could find itself having to provide similar compensation to those claiming ill-health effects from our wartime activities—past, present, and future—everywhere from the Korean peninsula to Afghanistan. No wonder that during the Clinton administration, the period when the United States restored relations with Vietnam, Assistant Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Gary Vest, during a visit to Vietnam, made clear to his hosts that the U.S. could not admit any responsibility for the consequences of its spraying of Agent Orange, according to several American officials. In the Bush administration, both Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson reportedly delivered similar messages to Hanoi.

**Hoang Thi The, a seventy-one-year-old widow, cares for two grown children with dioxin-related handicaps. "We have nothing," she says. "I worry what will happen to my children when I die."**

The U.S. government's position is understandable, but it rests on a blatant inconsistency. On the one hand, Washington insists it cannot pay compensation because there is insufficient evidence to show that the diseases the Vietnamese people suffer were caused by the Agent Orange U.S. forces sprayed. On the other hand, by law any American veteran who set foot in Vietnam during the war and who suffers—or whose offspring suffer—from any one of a wide range of medical conditions is presumed to have contracted that condition because of Agent Orange, and is hence eligible for VA health care and other benefits. Vietnamese officials can be forgiven for not taking seriously the U.S. government's insistence that when it refuses to acknowledge responsibility for the health effects of Agent Orange in Vietnam, it is merely following the science.

Despite disagreements over issues like Agent Orange, the United States and Vietnam are rapidly building a close relationship. For Americans who remember the last U.S. diplomats fleeing the embassy roof in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in 1975, this amity might seem surprising. But for Vietnam, which fought the French in the 1940s and '50s, and then China in the late 1970s, the American conflict was only one part of a much longer battle. "I don't think most of the issues related to the war are really on Vietnam's mind anymore," says one Vietnamese diplomat who has dealt with the U.S. for years. "We're more worried about what's happening now." And what's happening is business: two-way trade between the United States and Vietnam has grown from around $1.2 billion in 2000 to over $12 billion in 2007 (the most recent year with full data available). Today, America stands as Vietnam's biggest trading partner and largest export market, and the more than 1 million Vietnamese Americans contribute to the interpersonal ties between the countries. This economic relationship will only expand now that Vietnam has joined the World Trade Organization: Fortune 500 companies like Intel already have made big bets on Vietnam, with the tech giant building a $1 billion chip fabrication plant in the country.

Average Vietnamese, too, have developed favorable impressions of America. According to a 2008 survey of six nations in East Asia by the Chicago Coun-



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cil on Global Affairs, the influence of U.S. soft power in Vietnam (a combined measure of economic, political, and cultural influence) was higher than in all other countries surveyed, which included longtime American allies like Japan. On the ground in Vietnam, anecdotal evidence confirms the survey results. When then President Bill Clinton visited Hanoi in 2000, average Vietnamese mobbed his entourage, desperately hoping for autographs, or any kind of contact, from the American leader.

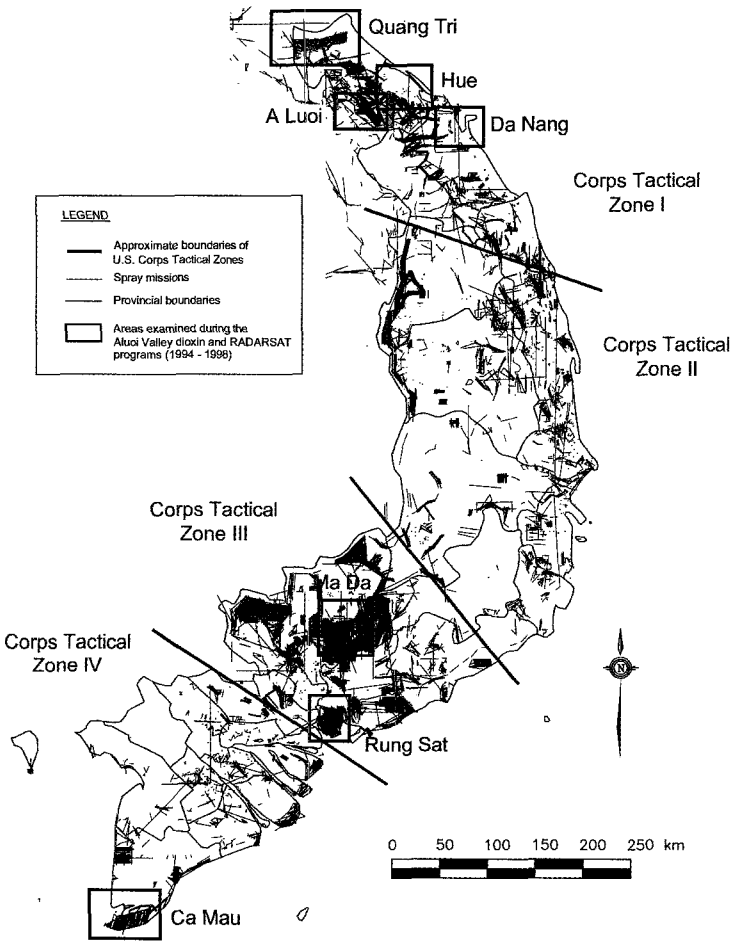
This surprising warmth stems from several factors. By the early 1990s, American war veterans, led by Senators John Kerry and John McCain, pushed for political normalization with Vietnam and led trips back to the country so that average veterans could reconcile with their old adversaries. Since the majority of Vietnam's 80 million people are under thirty years old, most do not remember the war years. And even for older Vietnamese, the fact that the "American war" was only part of decades of conflict—or centuries of conflict, if one counts Vietnam's historic wars against China—means that people do not simply focus their animosity against the United States and that Vietnamese take a highly pragmatic view of the world. "Throughout several thousand years of building and defending our country ... after each invasion that the Vietnamese people had to fight back, Vietnam ... was ready to establish and normalize the relations with the old rivals for the benefits of both sides," says Vietnam National University's Tien Nam Tran.

Perhaps more important, on a strategic level Vietnam's policymakers have chosen to build deep ties with America, and Americans have responded in kind. "You can see they are some of the most impressive strategic thinkers in the region, that they are looking for a real alliance—we want to work closely with them," says one senior State Department official. Strategic ties come from mutual fear of the giant neighbor on Vietnam's northern border. Washington worries that a resurgent China is making rapid inroads into Southeast Asia, long a sphere of American influence. Today, even as China has become one of Vietnam's biggest trading partners, and the two Communist parties proclaim brotherly ties, Hanoi remains uncomfortable with Beijing. The two nations claim some of the same areas of the South China Sea, and have skirmished over small islands in the disputed waters.

Besides its shared fear of China, Vietnam's geographic position also offers vital strategic advantages to the United States. It is situated relatively close to the Straits of Taiwan, the biggest potential flashpoint between Washington and Beijing. The U.S. Navy already has begun port calls in Vietnam, for the first time since the war years. In 2003, Pham Van Tra made the first visit by a Vietnamese defense minister to the Pentagon since the war.

There are still sticking points, other than the legacy of Agent Orange, in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship. Vietnam remains an authoritarian country, and Washington continues to highlight its human rights abuses and lack of religious freedom. In October, the advocacy organization Human Rights Watch blasted Hanoi for going backward on religious freedom after Vietnamese security forces beat monks aligned with Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist leader and peace activist who reportedly urged Hanoi to loosen restrictions on religion. "Once again Vietnam has clamped down on a peaceful religious group—even one that was initially welcomed by the government," Elaine Pearson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch, told reporters.

Aerial herbicide spray missions in southern Viet Nam, 1965 to 1971
(Source: U.S. Dept. of The Army).




**U.S. forces concentrated Agent Orange spraying in southern Vietnam, around the site of major battles.**

Hatfield Consultants



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Yet these problems do not overshadow cooperation. Hanoi has launched a regular, high-level dialogue with the State Department. "The Vietnamese are incredibly eager to meet with us, and it's an easy way to build up ties," says one State Department official who covers Southeast Asia. The U.S. gives Vietnam some $100 million in annual aid—to fight pandemic disease, to promote trade and investment, and to improve the rule of law, among other goals—making it one of the biggest recipients of American assistance of any nation in Asia. In the long run, in fact, Vietnam could become the closest U.S. ally in its region, given the shared strategic interests, Vietnam's pragmatic foreign policy, and the country's natural ties to America.

It is hard to imagine this mutually beneficial relationship coming to full fruition, however, unless the United States does more to address the legacy of Agent Orange. The burden of that legacy is on display at a daycare center for older children with mostly dioxin-related disabilities run by the Da Nang Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin. The center consists of four small rooms and one large one with paint-chipped walls, a few tables, some plastic chairs, and one lone fan. Dozens of children are crammed into the rooms, where they play with toys and learn vocational skills like sewing while their parents work in hotels and factories. The services are meager—the center cannot afford, among other things, an on-site doctor to give the children required check-ups on their conditions. "We can only take in the most severe cases, so we must decline many families who need help," says Nguyen Thi Hien, who runs the NGO. This facility and another one run by the NGO provide care for only about 100 of the estimated 1,400 kids in Da Nang with Agent Orange–related disabilities.

Washington has already embraced the foundations for a potential Agent Orange solution. In neighboring Laos, heavily bombed during the Vietnam War, the U.S. government has contributed a modest amount of assistance for getting rid of unexploded ordnance—projects that come with no statement of legal responsibility for American actions. This has helped to rebuild the United States' image in that country. And in Vietnam, the George W. Bush administration already took the first step toward an Agent Orange solution, providing an initial $3 million to clean up spilled Agent Orange in and around the former U.S. air bases in Vietnam and for the humanitarian needs of residents near those bases.

The next step will be to assist the actual victims of Agent Orange spraying. Washington will not want to deliver the aid itself; as Japan discovered when trying to help clean up the residue of World War II chemical weapons in China, getting involved in on-the-ground service delivery makes the donor vulnerable to byzantine and sometimes corrupt local politics. And because of the inherent difficulties of determining who is and who isn't a victim of Agent Orange, the U.S. should not even try. Better, instead, for Washington to determine an annual sum of aid for Vietnam, call it humanitarian assistance—thus avoiding any link to or responsibility for Agent Orange—and give it to Hanoi, letting the Vietnamese government figure out how to use it to help Agent Orange victims.

**If Obama offers humanitarian aid to the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange, he might find he has allies on the other side of the aisle, including John McCain.**

Such a resolution might not please everyone in Vietnamese government circles, where opinion remains divided on how aggressively to push the United States on Agent Orange. Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, tasked with building the strategic relationship, express in private the most caution about using Agent Orange as an issue. Agricultural officials, too, worry about allowing stories of dioxin to tarnish the reputation of Vietnamese produce. Meanwhile, according to several Vietnam specialists, conservatives within the ruling Communist Party, who tend to be the most skeptical of ties to the United States, want to push the hardest on Agent Orange, and might strongly resist a compromise in which the U.S. government did not admit any guilt. Still, given its inherent pragmatism, and its desire to move beyond the war, Hanoi probably would take such a deal.

The bigger political difficulty is likely to be here in the United States. Any attempt by the Obama administration to offer aid to the victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam will almost certainly be used by the president's opponents to stir up old Vietnam-era political and cultural resentments which, unlike in Vietnam, are still very much alive in the United States. But Obama might find that on this issue he has allies on the other side of the aisle who understand the strategic stakes. One of them may be John McCain, a key architect of the reconciliation with Vietnam. "We need to continue to address the issue [of Agent Orange] both in compensation for the victims as well as cleanup of areas that are clearly contaminated," the Arizona senator declared on a visit to Vietnam in April of 2008.

This fall, Obama probably will visit Vietnam himself to attend a summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. When pressed on Agent Orange by his Vietnamese hosts—as he almost certainly will be—the president will have a choice in how he responds. He could reiterate current U.S. policy and leave it at that. Or he could seize the moment by offering humanitarian aid to the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange—a bold move that would address a bitter legacy from America's past while sealing a vital strategic alliance for years to come. WM

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# THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF WAR

## Why militaries almost never clean up the messes they leave behind.

**By Clay Risen**

In the waning days of World War II, the retreating Japanese army left millions of chemical weapons scattered across northeastern China. To prevent the Allies from capturing them, units buried the shells—containing chemicals including mustard gas, phosgene, and lewisite—in fields, lakes, and streams. The result has been a slow-motion public health disaster: according to Chinese officials, in the last sixty years more than 2,000 people have died from toxins leaking from the weapons, and countless more have been sickened and permanently injured by them.

For decades, the Japanese government denied knowledge of the weapons, as well as any responsibility for cleaning them up. But in 1997 Tokyo entered into talks with Beijing over how to remedy the damage, and Japan eventually agreed to a multibillion-dollar plan to locate and destroy some 700,000 abandoned weapons. In a September 1997 speech in Beijing outlining a "new age" for Japanese-Chinese relations, then Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto described the effort as a salve on "a deep wound in our hearts" that reaffirmed the countries' "two thousand years of friendly relations."

What's amazing about the Japanese effort is that it's happening at all. Japan likely will end up spending almost $1.6 billion to destroy the stock of known chemical weapons in China. If even more weapons are found—and, World War II records being as poor as they are, that's a strong likelihood—the costs could easily double. No wonder the Japanese-Chinese deal is almost the only instance in which a country has voluntarily paid for the environmental damage caused by its military.

Why? The easy answer is that there's no legal requirement—international law is spotty at best when it comes to the environmental and public health legacies of military activity. But the real issues are cost and precedent: remediation and health care for victims are incredibly expensive, and no country wants to set a precedent that would force them to spend billions cleaning up their own mess. "Once you open that door, where does it end?" asks Brian Sheridan, a Clinton-era assistant secretary of defense who worked on cleanup issues. "It's enormously expensive. That's not what countries think of when they go to war."

**In the 1990s, the United States decommissioned scores of bases around the world, and in almost every instance left an environmental pigsty in its wake.**

With the United States now pondering a postwar future in Iraq and Afghanistan, some policymakers will wind up examining whether—or how—America might pay for any damage done to the Afghans' and Iraqis' environment and health. Already, for instance, doctors in Iraq are reporting higher-than-normal levels of cancer and birth defects in cities like Fallujah where the fighting was heaviest. So defense planners are looking to the legacy of Agent Orange in Vietnam for clues. Yet history shows that America's use of Agent Orange was hardly the first instance in which a country has ignored the environmental and health impacts of its wartime strategies. Indeed, almost without exception, countries do not pay for these legacies, for a number of reasons: the cost of cleanup is prohibitive; policymakers worry about the impact of paying on national security; and international law cannot hold a polluter accountable. And when, in a rare case like Japan, nations do pay, they do so for strategic, not moral, reasons.

The U.S. military is hardly a paragon of environmental stewardship, but its sins pale in comparison with those of the former Soviet Union—both in terms of damage caused and refusal to account for it. Like a receding tide revealing flotsam and jetsam, in the early 1990s withdrawing Russian troops left behind thousands of square miles of polluted territory, mostly in the form of bases and testing ranges once home to the mighty Soviet army. In Estonia, where 570 Soviet military facilities occupied almost 2 percent of the entire country, experts found thousands of unexploded rockets, air bases where fuel oil had seeped twenty feet below the surface, and nuclear power plants where toxic waste was left sitting in the open. In the mid-1990s, the cost of cleanup



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A Japanese expert in China labels chemical weapons left by the Japanese military during World War II.



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was estimated at $6 billion, nearly four times the tiny Baltic state's budget.

Russia, however, refused to provide assistance. "It was almost impossible to get Russia to pay off its financial obligations, such as its debts. It is clear that winning any environmental compensation would be impossible," says Petr Pavlinek, an expert on the eastern European environment at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Russia further claimed, accurately, that the withdrawal agreements it signed with its former satellites absolved it of any cleanup responsibility. Nor did it help that Russia, even at its weakest point in the early 1990s, was too big for its former allies to push around. "The affected countries have no leverage to win any compensation from Russia," says Pavlinek. "How can they make Russia pay? So if they want to clean up the environmental damage they have to do it by themselves, and pay for it, too."

Russia wasn't the only Cold War adversary to skip out on cleanup duty. During the 1990s the United States decommissioned scores of bases around the world, and in almost every instance it left an environmental pigsty in its wake. The sprawling naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines, once America's largest overseas military installation, never had a sewage treatment plant; instead, wastewater was dumped directly into the bay. In 1992, the General Accounting Office (predecessor of today's Government Accountability Office) estimated that the cost of cleaning up the facility, along with Clark Air Base to the north, "could approach Superfund proportions." The 1991 eruption of the Philippines' Mount Pinatubo exposed these shortcomings: the volcano sent thousands fleeing to the bases for safety, and after just months of living there, hundreds came down with asbestosis and other ailments likely caused by military toxins. But when Manila demanded compensation, Washington balked, claiming, justifiably, that the 1947 Military Bases Agreement between the two countries cleared it of any responsibility for the base once it left. Washington's attitude, says Sheridan, was that "fighting the Cold War was a shared responsibility—we did our part by providing a protective umbrella, and they provided the land." Though local nonprofits and members of the Filipino government continue to press the United States for aid, observers say there is almost no chance that Manila will ever see a penny in compensation.

The United States did a better job cleaning up after itself in Panama, where it steadily decommissioned bases throughout the 1990s in the run-up to the handover of the Panama Canal Zone on December 31, 1999. Unlike in the relatively unimportant Philippines, the U.S. had a powerful strategic reason to help, though the assistance did not please all Panamanians. Much of the American cleanup was focused on unexploded ordnance left on firing ranges deep in the Panamanian jungle, which was difficult to reach. In several cases the Pentagon simply cordoned off the contaminated areas, claiming that moving in equipment would do more damage to the environment than just leaving the weapons to rot.

**When, in rare cases, nations pay for the environmental damage caused by their militaries, they do so for strategic reasons, not moral ones.**

As in Panama, in Canada the U.S. has serious strategic interests. The country is also America's largest trading partner. So while the U.S. military shuttered several Canadian facilities in the 1990s and claimed it had "no legal obligation" to help clean them up, in 1998 Washington reversed its position and offered $100 million. The reason? Realpolitik. "There is no other country with the same combination of geography, historical relationship, and vital significance to U.S. national security," said Deputy Secretary of Defense John Hamre in a letter to Congress—though he made sure to add that this was "a special case not duplicated anywhere else in the world."

If countries don't want to pay for cleanup, international law can hardly make them. While a number of treaties since the 1970s—the First Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, the Environmental Modification Convention, and others—have tried to limit the environmental consequences of war, they have all made broad exceptions for militarily necessary activity. They have also had weak, even nonexistent, enforcement mechanisms, and the definition of "militarily necessary" has been highly flexible. "Where the international community has sought to hold states and individuals responsible for environmental harm caused during armed conflict, results have largely been poor," concludes a recent report by the United Nations Environmental Program.

One exception to this weak enforcement was the 1991 United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC), which oversaw payments by Iraq for damages it caused in Kuwait during the first Gulf War—explicitly including, for the first time, damage to the environment. "It was found that the intentional opening and burning of the wells as a tool of war merited compensation and liability," says Mark Drumbl, an international environmental law specialist at Washington and Lee's School of Law. The $28 billion paid to Kuwait and its citizens since then, coming primarily from the so-called Oil-for-Food Program, has helped deal with the millions of gallons of crude oil spilled during Iraq's "scorched earth" campaign.

This was, of course, victors' justice, not the result of a voluntary international regime. More to the point, the UNCC effort also proves the limits of international legal protections. In 2005 the UNCC denied a request by Saudi Arabia for a share of the Iraqi funds to cover public health damages, based on a two-year study by researchers at Johns



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Hopkins; according to the UNCC, the research failed to show conclusively that the increased respiratory ailments and decreased life spans found among the Saudi population were exclusively caused by the war, holding claimants to a standard that was almost impossible to meet.

Even the Chemical Weapons Convention, which has done a remarkable job of ridding the planet of domestic chemical weapons stocks, has had only a mixed record at forcing countries to clean up weapons abandoned overseas. Ethiopia, for example, has charged that Italian chemical weapons—in particular, mustard gas and phosgene, which Mussolini's Fascist government used in the mid-1930s during the Second Italo-Abyssinian War—remain scattered around the country. Yet in a recent official statement, Italy claims, "According to our records in Rome, at the end of the 1935–1936 war between Italy and Ethiopia, no deposits of chemical armaments were left in the country," and it has refused to offer compensation.

So why did Japan choose the road less traveled? Why didn't it do like Italy and Russia and simply stonewall? In fact, at first, it did: China began calling for compensation in the mid-1980s, and it took twenty years for Tokyo to even admit it had left chemical weapons behind. What changed, fundamentally, wasn't the force of international law or Japan's sense of moral responsibility, but China's emergence as a regional and then a global superpower, which changed Japan's own strategic calculus. With China on the ascendance militarily—playing a larger role in resolving regional disputes like North Korea, and becoming Japan's largest trading partner—Tokyo could not afford to let World War II legacies get in the way of what was becoming its most important economic and political relationship in Asia. In other words, like the U.S. decision to approve cleanup in Canada but not in the Philippines, Japan made a strategic choice. "It's a savvy thing for Japan to be engaged with," says Sheila Smith, a Japan expert at the Council on Foreign Relations. "It's a threatening situation, with people getting hurt every day, and it's something Japan can do something about right now."

Beginning in the early 1990s, Japan sent teams of scientists to survey the location and extent of the weapon dumps, and in 1995 it formed a binational team to isolate and neutralize thirty chemical shells. But much more help was needed, and in 1999 Japan inked a deal with China to locate and destroy massive amounts of chemicals. Japan, however, made the mistake of attempting to handle the cleanup itself, rather than providing money to the Chinese government and letting Beijing handle the actual details. Japan's attempt to manage the cleanup has resulted in cost overruns, delays, and acrimony. In 2008, four executives at Pacific Consultants International, the firm contracted to help implement the cleanup, were arrested for siphoning more than $1.3 million out of the program and into their private bank accounts. "Getting it all together has been more of a hassle than anyone anticipated," says Jeffrey Kingston, a professor at Temple University's Tokyo campus. "A lot of those barrels were dumped in swampy ground, so it's not an easy operation." Simply getting high-tech remediation equipment through the baroque Chinese customs bureaucracy has been a nightmare, he says.

**Even as the U.S. military pulls out of Iraq, Iraqi doctors are reporting higher-than-normal levels of cancer and birth defects in cities like Fallujah where the fighting was heaviest.**

Because of the cleanup problems, the Japanese effort hasn't won many kudos from the Chinese public. As a result, outside observers are likely to take the Japanese experience as an object lesson in why *not* to embark on cleanup efforts. Here's a country that committed billions, not to mention its reputation, to a project whose scope it didn't comprehend—and what does it have to show for it?

Given such meager precedents, it is all but impossible that the United States will feel itself compelled, legally or morally, to compensate Vietnam for its use of Agent Orange. Even if it did, says a former Pentagon official, "It will always be in our interest to deny." After all, admitting responsibility for Agent Orange's effects would open the U.S. military to untold claims around the world. "We will do gymnastics to avoid setting that precedent," says the former official.

Still, there are ways to provide Agent Orange–related aid to Vietnam without setting such a precedent. Indeed, the U.S. is already doing so. In early 2008, as a result of diplomatic overtures from the Bush administration, a small amount of American funds began flowing to a dioxin remediation effort around Da Nang, one of the central depots for Agent Orange during the war. But the State Department and the Pentagon have been careful to characterize the Da Nang effort as a humanitarian gesture, not an admission of a link between the dioxin around the city and the former herbicides stored there. "I would say the real reason they're doing it is geopolitical," say Susan Hammond, director of the War Legacies Project, which studies the long-term health and ecological consequences of war. "They want to have closer military-to-military relations with Vietnam."

Like China vis-à-vis Japan, Vietnam is an increasingly important trading partner for the United States, and an important potential ally in the event that competition with China heats up. Whether it is important enough to merit serious compensation will determine whether it ends up like the Philippines, Panama, or Canada. WM

**Clay Risen** is the managing editor of *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*.



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# A HARD WAY TO DIE

## Why hundreds of thousands of Vietnam vets with Agent Orange–related diseases have been made to suffer without VA health care.

**By Phillip Longman**

Gary Nickel, 62, never liked to talk about his experiences in Vietnam. It's only recently that his wife, Terry, has gotten some details out of him about why he's started screaming in his sleep and locking his hands together as if he were choking someone. He's finally told her, for example, about the time when, at the giant Bien Hoa Air Base, twenty miles northeast of Saigon, a plane landed and all the men jumped off puking. Nickel, whose job was to load and unload aircraft, discovered inside the rotting head of a U.S. soldier stuck on a post.

Gary told her, too, about his flashbacks to the many times during the Tet Offensive when he shook in bunkers while under mortar attack. After much objection about "not wanting to be pegged" with a mental illness, Gary at last relented to his wife's insistence that he seek treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, and now takes medication for it prescribed by private physician. But that's not his greatest medical need. Gary also suffers from Parkinson's disease, a degenerative brain disorder that impairs motor and cognitive skills. Parkinson's is most often found among the elderly, but Gary was only fifty-seven when he was first diagnosed, and he degenerated quickly.

Within two years of his diagnosis, he had to give up his job at the water treatment plant in Moorhead, Minnesota, and Terry had to give up her job as a nurse to stay with him around the clock. (The couple have no children.) Forced to live on a reduced income, including a $450-a-month Social Security disability check, they sold their home and bought a smaller, easier-to-navigate house furnished with a hospital bed, a trapeze, and special pillows to help with Gary's bedsores. Terry is also responsible these days for looking after her eighty-year-old mother, who now lives with them.

This might be just another sad story of another working-class American family struggling with poor luck and bad health, except that it gets worse in ways that involve us all. Terry thought it very important that she get her husband enrolled at the VA Medical Center in nearby Fargo, North Dakota, which would provide, among other benefits, equipment like the ramps he needs and, importantly, respite care for herself. She knew that at their income level the couple wouldn't meet the VA's strict means test for admission. But she'd been reading about growing scientific evidence linking Parkinson's disease to exposure to Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant widely used in Vietnam during the war. And, as it happens, the Bien Hoa base was and remains an Agent Orange "hot spot" in Vietnam—so much so that the U.S. government committed in 2008 to helping the Vietnamese government clean up the high levels of dioxins and other contaminants that still exist there. So in 2007 Terry applied for her husband to be admitted to the VA on the premise that his Parkinson's was a "service-connected" illness.

**The VA conditions benefits, understandably, on scientific proof. But that proof accumulates so slowly that many veterans will be dead and buried before they're finally deemed eligible.**

The bureaucracy at the Fargo VA, however, was unmoved. Fourteen months after making their application, the Nickels received a single-spaced, two-and-a-quarter-page letter, dated July 7, 2008, that spelled out the VA's rationale for rejecting Gary's enrollment. The case officer acknowledged finding a study on Wikipedia that showed that people exposed to herbicides like Agent Orange have "a 70 percent greater incidence of PD than individuals not exposed," but then went on to suggest that Gary could have contracted PD at such a young age because of his "14 year history of smoking," or "occupational hazards" at the water plant. Terry says she assembled hundreds of pages of studies to rebut these claims—a tactic that has worked for a handful of Vietnam vets with Parkinson's. But after a year of waiting for the verdict on their appeal she learned, with the help of local legislators, that the VA had simply closed their case. "In my eyes," Terry says, "it's all political."

Though she lost her battle, Terry turned out to be right on the facts. This fall, the head of the VA, Eric K. Shinseki, acknowledged growing medical evidence linking Parkinson's and two other common diseases to Agent Orange. Yet Gary Nickel and hundreds of thousands of other vets have been made to suffer



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for years without care thanks to a system that conditions benefits on scientific proof—proof that accumulates so slowly that many veterans will be dead and buried before they're finally deemed eligible.

Why can't all Vietnam vets who were exposed to Agent Orange automatically get into the VA? Didn't we take care of that problem years ago? Those of us beyond a certain age can remember the headlines, the angry demonstrations, the acrimonious hearings. About how the government long denied that exposure to Agent Orange could contribute to any ill-health except a case of chloracne, a disfiguring skin condition. About the gigantic class-action suit against Dow, Monsanto, and other manufacturers of Agent Orange, which left Vietnam veterans furious over its miniscule out-of-court settlement (an eventual $197 million paid to 52,000 vets over ten years, or about $3,800 each). About Reagan's VA administrator, Robert Nimmo, who used an appearance on NBC's *Today* show to call Vietnam veterans "a bunch of crybabies." About conservative think tanks that denounced as "junk science" any studies implicating Agent Orange as a cause of illness. And about how, finally, the federal government acknowledged the mounting scientific evidence linking Agent Orange to a variety of diseases and promised to help its victims.

On February 6, 1991, President H. W. Bush signed the Agent Orange Act into law. It seemed like a great victory to Vietnam vets at the time. The legislation codified that Vietnam veterans with any of three conditions known by then to be strongly associated with Agent Orange—chloracne, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and soft-tissue sarcoma, with some exclusions—would automatically qualify for VA health care, no questions asked. And the bill called upon the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to continuously look for new evidence of Agent's Orange's long-term health effects. Backed by the great champion of veterans' causes, the late Democratic Congressman G. V. "Sonny" Montgomery, as well as by then Republican Senator Arlen Specter, the bill promised to bring closure to what Bush called "this very complex and very divisive issue."

For awhile, the legislation seemed to stand as an example of an overdue, but morally sound, workable policy based on science. In 1993, the IOM found a positive association between Agent Orange and Hodgkin's and several other comparatively rare diseases, and the VA dutifully added these to the list of conditions presumed to be service connected for anyone who served in Vietnam. But as the years went by, the IOM and other researchers kept turning up more and more evidence of more and more complications from exposure to Agent Orange. A huge shocker, to most Vietnam vets and to federal budgeters, came in 2000 when the IOM reported a link between exposure to Agent Orange and type II diabetes—one of the most common diseases in America. It turns out to be substantially more common among Vietnam vets, and though it cost a bundle, the VA, under the waning Clinton administration, changed its rules so that all Vietnam vets with the condition are now presumed to have a service-related illness and therefore are eligible for VA care.

**In Vietnam, the environment was saturated not just with Agent Orange but with a stew of other toxic chemicals whose effects could have been harmful in combination, though it would be extremely difficult to determine that scientifically.**

Then, though it attracted little attention in a country that had moved on from the war, the news kept getting worse. As Vietnam vets passed through their fifties and sixties, they experienced high rates and early onsets of more and more chronic diseases, like hypertension and cancers of the lung and prostate, for which Agent Orange turned out to be a risk factor. Science also began confirming many of their suspicions about their children's health. In 2007, for example, the VA reported that 1,200 children of Vietnam veterans had spina bifida, a birth defect closely associated with a key ingredient of Agent Orange.

Then, in July of last year, a bombshell landed on Secretary Shinseki's desk. In the most recent of a long series of reports entitled *Veterans and Agent Orange*, the IOM added Parkinson's as well as ischemic heart disease and hairy cell leukemia to its list of conditions associated with Agent Orange exposure. In response, Shinseki ordered a rule change redefining these three conditions as service related for any Vietnam vet who has them. Presuming those rules make it through final review, people like Gary Nickel and some 200,000 other vets will soon have a much easier time claiming benefits.

But what about vets who suffer from conditions that have not yet been but may someday be linked to Agent Orange? For now, their only hope is to follow the route Gary Nickel took: try to prove that their case of the disease was caused by exposure to Agent Orange to the satisfaction of some overwhelmed VA service officer, who, as we've seen, may well try to settle the matter with some scratching around on Wikipedia.

Some of the administrative problems have been there all along. For many veterans of the Vietnam era, just proving they were in the service, let alone victims of Agent Orange, can be an ordeal, due largely to a 1973 fire in St. Louis that destroyed many military service records. Today, if one picks up the membership magazine of the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), one finds pages of fine-print notices like this one:



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Terry Nickel assists her husband, Gary, whose Parkinson's disease may have been caused by exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam.

Dan Koeck

*Incident verification needed. National Records Center advises me that my documents were lost in a fire. Seeking anyone who served the 611th Trans. Bn., Vinh Long, 1969–70. Having health issues due to an accident that occurred during a recovery mission. Contact: Stan Floyd, americanairboats@ymail.com.*

By law, the VA is supposed to help vets to find their service records and otherwise establish their eligibility. But David Houppert, who directs the VVA's efforts to help its members navigate the VA bureaucracy, says that the government employees charged with the task of plowing through the dusty repositories of the military and the National Archives are often so overwhelmed with their caseloads that they make only perfunctory searches. As a result, a niche industry now exists that helps vets who can afford its fees to track down their records.

Beyond the challenge of establishing a service record is the often meta-



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physical problem of proving that one's ill-health is related to military service. By their very nature, almost all chronic disorders are multicausal, influenced by factors such as genetics, diet, behavior, and environmental influences often all acting together. In Vietnam, the environment was saturated not just with Agent Orange but with a stew of other toxic chemicals whose effects could have been harmful in combination, though it would be extremely difficult to determine that scientifically. "Operation Flyswatter," for example, sprayed 1.76 million concentrated liters of the insecticide malathion over major bases and cities every nine days as part of efforts to prevent malaria. The same troops were given "Monday pills," weekly doses of the antimalarial drug chloroquine, which inhibits an enzyme the body uses to help metabolize neurotoxins. "Bottom line," says Alan B. Oates, who heads the VVA's Agent Orange committee, "Vietnam veterans were taking prescribed medication that reduced their body's ability to detoxify itself while being subjected to exposures of neurotoxins."

There has been little study of how Agent Orange may have interacted with other toxins common in the environment of war-era Vietnam, including DDT, paraquat, napalm, jet fuels, and many others. The VA could greatly advance scientific knowledge on the subject if it coded its vaunted electronic medical record system with information about where its patients served in the military. This would provide researchers with a powerful tool for determining whether and how much service in Vietnam correlates with various diseases that later show up in vets and their descendents. It could also help our understanding of Gulf War syndrome, and of ailments that may be experienced in the future by those now serving in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But we should also ask ourselves what, exactly, we would do with this information. Yes, it is good to know all we can about the epidemiology of disease, but there are limits to what we can know, and dangers in using science inappropriately. Consider, for example, that even if all involved had acted in perfect good faith, most of the long-term effects of Agent Orange and other toxic exposures could only have been discovered with the passage of time—time for Vietnam veterans to start having deformed children, and even longer for them to start coming down with Parkinson's. And even then, all science can deliver are generalizations about large populations, not a determination of what caused any one person's chronic illness.

And so we are left with huge numbers of Vietnam vets who may be enduring the effects of Agent Orange without care or compensation until their own suffering and death at last produces enough scientific data to nail down the causality. Normally, we want science to drive policy. But in this realm, waiting for science has meant waiting for an army to age and die, while also forcing sick veterans and their loved ones into the gears of a giant, overburdened, capricious bureaucracy—all for the purpose of trying to exclude the "undeserving."

**In retrospect, justice would have been far better served if we had just presumed all along that all Vietnam veterans deserved VA care—and it is still not too late to do that.**

In retrospect, justice would have been far better served if we had just presumed all along that all Vietnam veterans deserved VA care—and it is still not too late to do that. Nor is it too late to do it for younger and older vets. As a practical matter, the majority of our veterans are or soon will be old enough to qualify for Medicare, so taxpayers are on the hook for the cost of their care anyway. Does it make sense to exclude them from the VA when it delivers care at a lower cost per patient and enjoys higher patient satisfaction than Medicare?

The VA also has excess capacity in many parts of the country and will soon have much, much more as the once-giant ranks of World War II and Korean War vets grow thin. Meanwhile, the VA provides, for those who can get in, very high-quality care, having become widely recognized over the last decade as a world leader in the use of information technology to ensure patient safety and to drive the development of coordinated, evidence-based protocols of care.

We need to open up the VA and grow it, extending eligibility not only to all vets but to their family members as well. This not only makes clinical sense—think of Terry Nickel and the millions of aging veterans' wives like her—it also makes economic sense. So long as the VA remains one of, if not the most, cost-effective, scientifically driven, integrated health care delivery system in the country, the more patients it treats, the better.

Every vet should be able to use his or her insurance, including Medicare insurance, to receive treatment at the VA. Those who are indigent or who suffer from obvious war wounds should be given free care; others should contribute to the cost of their care as they are able. But any American who honorably served in the military should not find him- or herself locked out of the VA.

For far too many sick veterans, especially those who served in Vietnam, experiencing a rejection like Gary Nickel endured is taken as the final insult of an ungrateful nation. It's a hard way to die. For the rest of us, joining their cause is not only morally right, but also advances the mission of true health reform by bringing us closer to establishing the principle that access to needed health care does not have to be earned and demonstrated, but is a right of citizenship. WM

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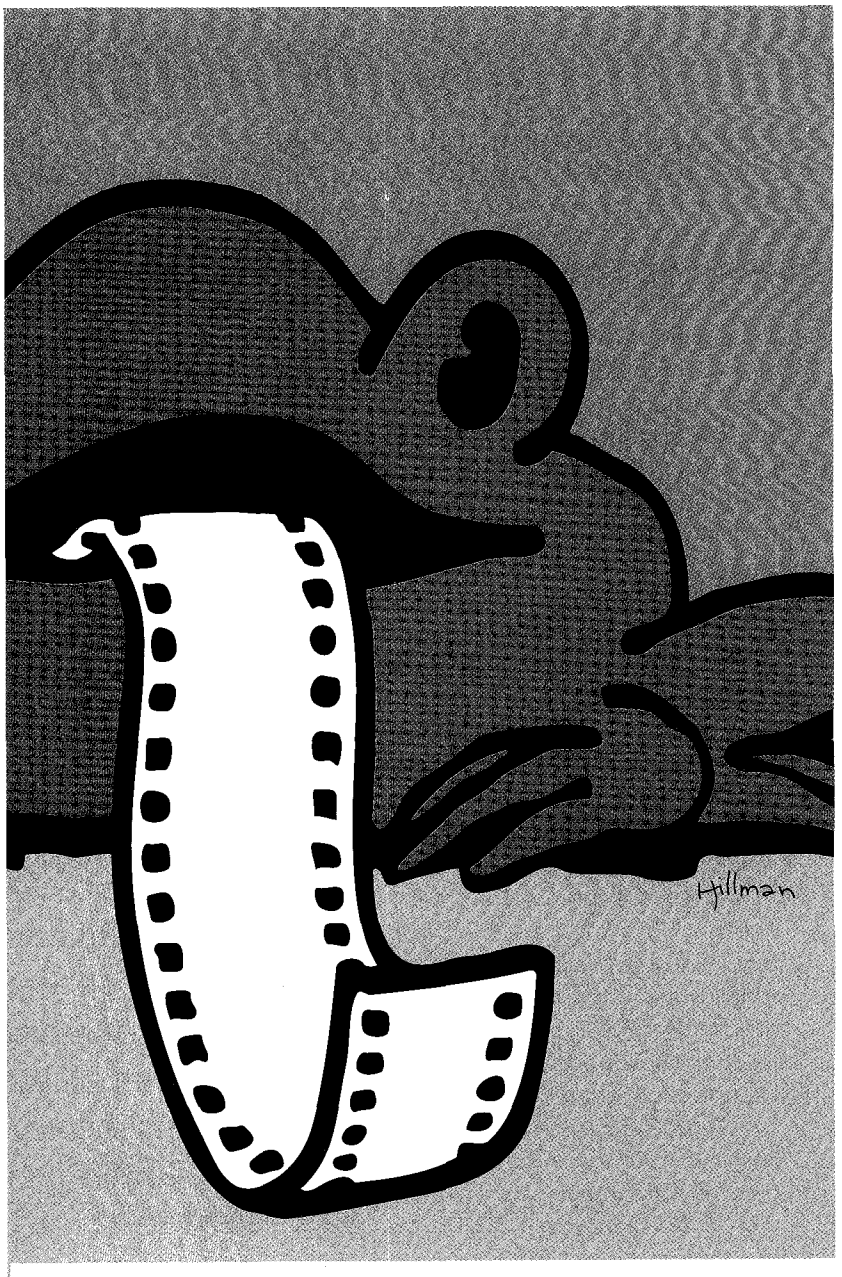


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mained consistently popular throughout last year's debate. What mattered was *which* bill—there were five of them up for debate in the Senate—and the White House, whose agenda rests almost entirely in the hands of a few moderate Senate Democrats, was naturally not interested in riling any of the authors. Rather than enlisting OFA to push for a specific piece of legislation, Obama used his speech to the organization's volunteers on October 20 to try to convince them that *any* of the bills would constitute a victory.

In short, the problem isn't that OFA is screwing up—it's that the Obama White House has been using Plouffe's invention for the wrong task. An organization of this nature is a marginal-at-best tool for advancing specific legislation. But with the right cues from its patron in the White House, OFA could be a powerful tool for expanding and remaking the Democratic Party—a mission that would, in the end, do far more to further Obama's agenda than a few hundred thousand phone calls.

In the days after the election, Obama's campaign operatives met in Chicago to mull the question of what to do with the machine they had spent the last two years assembling. There were essentially two options. One, espoused by Steve Hildebrand, Plouffe's deputy, was to turn it into a stand-alone liberal pressure group: an organization that would, like a supercharged MoveOn, take the raucous activist spirit that had animated the field troops of the Obama campaign and funnel it into a powerful policy movement. "I thought it would be important to really explore the idea," Marshall Ganz, who wasn't involved in the discussions but had stayed close with some of Obama's organizers, told me recently. "There was an opportunity to make something that would transcend all the issue groups and be an advocacy organization for a more progressive agenda." The most sweeping changes in the domestic policy landscape, he pointed out, had all resulted from the combined efforts of powerful outside pressure groups and sympathetic leaders on the inside. FDR had had the populist armies of Huey P. Long, Lyndon Johnson had the civil rights movement, even the Republican revolution had Grover Norquist and Jerry Falwell.

The problem with this idea was that Obama's supporters, whatever their ideological affinities, were mostly united by their affection for the president and their desire to win a pivotal election. As a candidate, Obama was hardly a liberal firebrand—his vision of government had been moderately left of center and mildly technocratic, more JFK than FDR. And in any case, transplanting the heart of a movement is a tricky thing—the civil rights movement didn't evolve out of Johnson-Humphrey '64, after all, and even Martin Luther King Jr. stumbled when he tried to extend his activist franchise to include poverty and housing rights.

David Plouffe had something else in mind: integrating OFA into the Democratic National Committee. This idea had its own outside champion in Howard Dean, who weighed in during the proceedings. As chairman of the DNC, Dean had pursued a "fifty-state strategy": eschewing the traditional Democratic practice of pouring money and people into competitive states and ignoring everyone else, Dean allocated a smattering of resources to parties in every single state, even deeply red ones where Democrats were about as popular as the Inner Mongolian People's Party. It was controversial among Democrats—Dean and Rahm Emanuel had once nearly come to blows over it—but the Obama campaign's similar approach in 2008 had vindicated Dean's vision. Now Dean saw the opportunity to use OFA to double down on the bet he had made, beefing up state Democratic outposts with Obama's grassroots supporters. "This is kind of a fusion of the old way of doing things, which is the president putting his stamp on the party," Dean told me, "and the fifty-state strategy, which is the new way of doing things."

*The Obama White House has been using its unprecedented resource for the wrong task. Organizing for America is a marginal-at-best tool for advancing specific legislation. But it could be a powerful tool for expanding and remaking the Democratic Party.*

But there was a problem with that, too: a lot of OFA's members didn't necessarily think of themselves as Democrats. This had been an issue during the campaign, when Obama's advisers were weighing the pros and cons of taking public financing during the general election. For legal reasons, Plouffe realized, such a move would mean asking Obama's army of volunteers and small donors, many of them independents and some Republicans, to work for and contribute to the DNC—something he wasn't sure they would do. "If these people were forced to volunteer through the Democratic Party, no matter how clearly the mission was stated, we feared we could lose up to 20 percent of our volunteers," Plouffe writes in *The Audacity to Win*.

In the end, Obama and OFA's organizers split the difference. They took Dean's advice, rebranding OFA as a "project of the DNC." But, wary of spooking Obama's non-Democratic voters, OFA has since self-consciously maintained the rhetoric of an independent grassroots organiza-



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tion. Unable to embrace either specific policy goals, the way an independent organization like MoveOn can, or overt party-building objectives, OFA instead sticks with ferocious consistency to a succinct and basically meaningless mission: "to support the president's agenda." This charter gives OFA a set of endlessly moveable goalposts, and lends an odd meta quality to the group's activism: it measures success less in actual legislative accomplishments than in the simple fact of its continued existence.

But this vagueness has an end date: this year's congressional elections, when Democrats, facing reelection battles in what will inevitably be a tough race for the party, will ask the most promising electoral operation in the Democratic orbit for help. When I called an in-state staffer for a Democratic congressman facing reelection in a conservative district this year, he spoke—on the condition of anonymity—with a wary respect for OFA's work so far. But, he told me, "when I ask their state director what they're doing, he says they're 'supporting the president's agenda.' I ask what the hell that actually means, and he can't tell me. I asked how they were going to play in 2010, and he had no response. And that has me worried, because you have these activists—we need their help. We need them to make phone calls for us."

*Democratic presidents from Kennedy onward tended to hoard the resources and popular support they received during their campaigns while using the party's war chest and staff to push their own agendas. This sucked money and attention away from what the party should have been doing: planning for the next election.*

He had good reason to be nervous: while the size of the grassroots operation that propelled Obama into office in 2008 was unprecedented, its in-it-but-not-of-it relationship with the Democratic Party wasn't. As Northwestern University political scientist Daniel J. Galvin argues in his fine new book *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush*, for the past half century Democratic presidents have taken a similar attitude toward the DNC, using it to advance their presidential agenda rather than building for the future. This was partly because for years, the future looked to be shaping up okay without their help. Since FDR, Democrats and Republicans alike had assumed that Democratic hegemony was the natural state of affairs in American politics—which, for a time, was true. When elections rolled around, Democratic presidential candidates could outsource the nuts and bolts of grassroots campaigning to urban political machines, labor unions, and civic associations; campaign structures like the DNC were mostly a technical necessity. Democrats had also inherited the early-twentieth-century Progressive movement's squeamishness about political parties, which the Progressives had viewed as inherently corrupt and inferior to the strong leadership of a president.

As a result, Galvin writes, Democratic presidents tended to hoard the resources and popular support they received during their campaigns, sequestering what grass roots they had in quasi-independent organizations while using the party's own war chest and staff to push their agendas. John F. Kennedy had his own "project" at the DNC, called Operation Support, with the OFA-like aim of using the president's celebrity appeal to prod along his legislative priorities, enlisting volunteers to write letters to the editor of their local newspapers, talk to their neighbors about Kennedy's policies, and browbeat recalcitrant members of what was at the time a still-heterodox Democratic coalition in Congress. Jimmy Carter maintained the Carter Network, an independent organization fueled by the zeal of 150,000 of his grassroots supporters. In 1993, Bill Clinton used the DNC as a staging ground for his National Health Care Campaign, which tasked veterans of his 1992 presidential campaign with using the DNC's human and infrastructural resources—along with $3 million of the organization's money—to build grassroots support for health care reform.

As far as agenda advancement went, these efforts ranged from benign to worthless. Worse, they sucked resources and attention away from what the Democratic campaign committees should have been doing: planning for the next election. (Both Carter's and Clinton's first DNC chairs saw this, and quit in frustration early in their respective tenures.) The deficit first became apparent in 1980, when the increasingly venal and discredited Democratic caucus's hold on Congress began to loosen and Democrats found that the institutions the party had counted on for electoral support, the unions and urban political machines, had mostly withered away. After pillaging the party in his first term and suffering the consequences in the 1994 midterms, Clinton tried to rebuild it in his second. But a few years of feverish fund-raising were hardly enough to reverse decades of decline, and both Al Gore and John Kerry went into their respective elections outmatched by the well-oiled Republican campaign machine.



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By then, the Republicans had spent half a century pursuing a wholly opposite strategy, with much better results. Like the Democrats, they had long presumed the GOP to be the minority party—and they hoped to change that. To that end, they had consistently reinvested the momentum of their campaigns into the Republican Party itself.

The process began with Dwight D. Eisenhower, who took office in 1953 under what were, in many ways, Obama-like circumstances. Harry Truman was shuffling out of office in a funk of unpopularity. Ike had beaten Adlai Stevenson decisively the previous November, with 83 percent of the electoral vote and the strongest Republican showing in the South in years. His party controlled both the House and the Senate. These were wafer-thin majorities, however, and there was little reason to believe they would last. The GOP itself was near broke and balkanized, with liberals and moderates fending off a burgeoning conservative insurgency energized by Joe McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade, then in its third year.

Eisenhower, who counted himself among the moderates, was not a particularly Republican Republican. His campaign had been viewed as a largely nonpartisan one; he was a general and a national hero, a man who Walter Lippmann, writing in the *Washington Post*, believed "in the style of George Washington was above party and above faction." His youthful supporters had organized for him largely through Citizens for Eisenhower, his own grassroots organization that stood outside the GOP. In his first year he often fought congressional Republicans over legislation, and appealed to their Democratic rivals for the stray votes he needed.

But Eisenhower had few illusions about the limits of this nonpartisanship. At the end of the day, he knew, American government was a two-party system, and he was in one of them. If he poured his own star power and resources into rebuilding the GOP, Eisenhower reasoned, he could remake it as an extension of himself, and one that could continue promoting his legislative aims beyond the end of his own presidency. He urged his grassroots supporters—the Citizens for Eisenhower groups that had powered his '52 campaign—to become card-carrying Republicans. "I pointed out that if we focused the whole effort on me as an individual then it would follow that in the event of my disability or death, the whole effort would collapse," he wrote in his diary after one conversation with a Citizens leader. "This, I pointed out, was absurd. The idea is far bigger than any one individual."

Eisenhower wasn't able to keep the Republican Party moderate, but he did lay the foundation for its eventual dominance. His successors continued his work. Nixon, while not exactly the greatest poster boy for the Republican brand by the end of his presidency, directed efforts to strengthen local parties and build on regional victories. Gerald Ford, acutely aware of the GOP's post-Nixon vulnerability, fundraised obsessively for the party, but as an appointed president he had no base of campaign supporters to rally to the cause. He succeeded, however, in building a powerful operation to bequeath to a president who did: Ronald Reagan.

Reagan ran the most grassroots-driven Republican campaign since Eisenhower's, and once in office he set about using it to expand the party's infrastructure. He filled the RNC's finance chair with Richard DeVos, the billionaire cofounder of the Amway Corporation, who brought with him the business model that had made his fortune, and worked to convert the party faithful's social networks into fundraising tools for the GOP. Republicans were now urged to bring their friends and family into the party ranks.

Reagan's 1984 reelection marked the greatest expansion in the Republican electorate to date, snagging 64 percent of young and first-time voters. But there was one problem: like the voters who would elect Barack Obama twenty-four years later, Reagan's constituency contained many voters who weren't yet members of his party. There were unaffiliated young people, independents, evangelicals who had been skittish about electoral politics, and conservative Democrats who saw the mainstream of their party shifting away from them.

*Ronald Reagan's constituency contained many independents, conservative Democrats, and others who weren't members of his party. By convincing them to become Republicans, Reagan built an electoral machine that carried out his agenda beyond the end of his own career.*

In Reagan's view, this was the mother of all opportunities. If he could bring supporters into the Republican fold, he realized, he could do what Eisenhower had aspired to do: rebrand the Republican Party as a vehicle for his own ideology for a generation to come. Reagan threw himself into the project in his second term, urging his unaffiliated voters to think of the Republican Party as *their* party, and to participate in the electoral process at every level as Republicans. At a 1985 White House reception for ex-Democratic politicians who had switched parties, he spoke of his own 1961 party conversion, and commended his guests for undertaking "an act of courage and an act of conscience ... You're not isolated cases," he told them. "You're part of a great national change, a national movement that is sweeping the electorate."

Reagan's effort succeeded spectacularly. During his second term, the Republicans forged what would be a three-



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decades-and-counting alliance with evangelicals, broke the Democrats' hold on local offices in the South, and created a class of suburban Republican voters that would carry the Republican class of 1994 and George W. Bush to their later victories. For the first time since FDR, Republicans began to think of themselves not as a permanent minority but as an emerging majority. But the greatest victory was Reagan's own—by bringing his own constituents into the party, he was able to realize Eisenhower's dream of an electoral machine that perpetuated his agenda after the end of his own career.

Galvin's account of all this is disciplined and scholarly, with accordingly focused conclusions. Still, the lessons are hard to miss. One is that trying to push an agenda from the White House, using the organs of the party, is usually a mug's game. Sweeping legislative accomplishments like the New Deal and the Civil Rights Act were the result of an ambitious president, a disciplined Congress, and outside movements pushing for concrete policy goals; if the second and third components aren't in place, there's not much the president can do to gin them up, regardless of the size of his base. What he can do, and do effectively, is play the long ball: a popular president is the best branding device a political party can hope for, and a political party is the best means the president has for extending the brand.

*Asking his supporters to join the Democratic Party would run counter to Obama's image as a man who wants to transcend the old political categories, an inclination that seems deeply rooted in his political nature.*

Barack Obama is the first Democratic president of the modern era to take office with a Republican's sense of vulnerability, the knowledge that his party's hold on power, however robust it may seem, may prove tenuous. And the novel design of the Obama campaign—its largely self-sustaining, volunteer- and small-donor-driven structure—provides him with a rare opportunity as president. Unlike previous cash-strapped Democrats, who arrived in the Oval Office with onerous campaign debts and had to make hard choices about how to spend what money they had, Obama can afford to invest in both his own projects and the party's. Obama won the 2008 election with an unheard-of $18 million left over—money that, according to a *Politico* analysis of Federal Elections Commission filings, has allowed the DNC to not only add scores of OFA staffers to its payroll but also bring the DNC war chest to within $7 million of the historically better-funded RNC's. OFA now has paid staffers in all but one state (Oklahoma), most of them embedded with local Democratic parties and well networked with local ex-Obama campaign volunteers. All but one of the half-dozen state-party chairs I talked to spoke of this apparatus in hopeful terms.

But so far, Obama has failed to do what Reagan and Eisenhower did: he has asked his supporters to rally around Democratic causes, but he has balked at asking them to become Democrats. He has asked his loyal enthusiasts to take ownership of a presidency, but not of a party. The distinction matters—you can support a presidency, but you can't really participate in it. OFA has called on its members to contribute money, make phone calls on a handful of issues, even knock on doors for Democratic candidates running in off-year elections in November (desultory get-out-the-vote efforts which, unsurprisingly, turned out only dribs and drabs of Obama's electorate for John Corzine and Creigh Deeds in their failed gubernatorial campaigns in New Jersey and Virginia). But it hasn't asked them to, for instance, work on behalf of primary candidates who reflect their values, shape local party platforms, or run for office themselves. It's why, for all of its fervent activity, OFA looks less like a movement than a cheering section.

Bringing his supporters into the party would run counter to the image Obama projected during and after the campaign, that of a man who wants to transcend the old political categories, an inclination that seems deeply rooted in his political nature. And an invitation to join the party is also necessarily an invitation to shake it up—the same Democrats seeking to enlist OFA's volunteer army this year could find themselves facing its members in a primary battle first. But these are necessary risks for Obama and his partisans to take. Success in politics is incremental, and a party, as Eisenhower observed, is a vastly more durable thing than a presidency—it can carry out a mission above the churn of individual flesh that moves under its banner. Belief in it is what made Reaganism not just a fad but a political paradigm, one that filled the vacuum left behind by a receding Democratic establishment. In the wake of the Republican collapses of 2006 and 2008, Obama has a similar opportunity.

If the idea of turning Obama's dewy-eyed idealists into nut-cutting party politicos seems cynical, it shouldn't. Reagan's bid to pull his voters into the Republican Party was simply a pragmatic acknowledgment of how the system worked, and a bid to prove that it *could* work. Obama, a man whose move into politics stemmed from an early dissatisfaction with the limits of working outside the system, surely understands this as well as anyone. What remains to be seen is whether he can explain it to his most loyal followers. WM

**Charles Homans** is an editor of the *Washington Monthly*.



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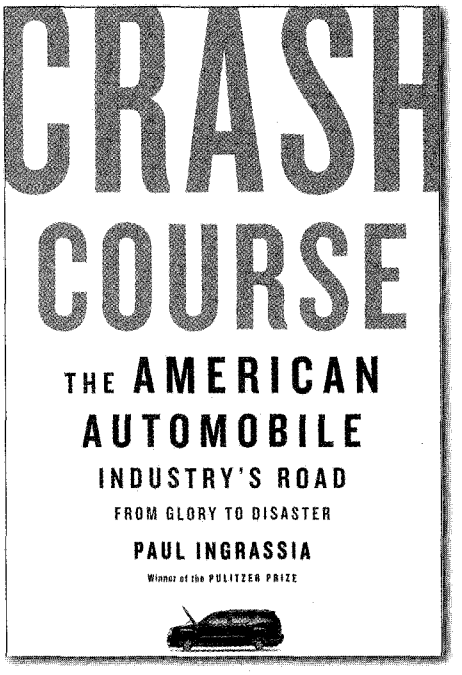
# Detroit on Life Support

## Will the Big Three become the Small Two?

**By Kevin Drum**




**Crash Course: The American Automobile Industry's Road from Glory to Disaster**
by Paul Ingrassia
Random House, 320 pp.

Back in 1994, Paul Ingrassia wrote a book, with coauthor Joseph B. White, about the American auto industry. Its title, *Comeback*, pretty much says it all. *Comeback* was a gossipy, insidery account of Detroit's boardroom wars of the late 1980s and early '90s, which ended with the bad guys kicked out, a new breed of CEO taking charge, and the Big Three once again on top of the world.

What, I wondered, did the *Washington Monthly* think of all this back in the day? So I dug into the archives and took a look. James Bennet, who is now editor of the *Atlantic* but started his career at the *Monthly*, reviewed *Comeback* in 1994, and it turns out he was properly skeptical. "It is too much of a leap," Bennet wrote, "to conclude that Detroit has regained the lead, as the packaging of this book suggests, perhaps in hopes of drawing a wider readership." After all, the auto industry had looked publicly robust before, even as it was getting sicker on the inside. Was it possible that a strong yen was just hiding all the usual Detroit pathologies once again?

We all know the answer to that question now, so kudos to Bennet for getting it right fifteen years ago. But how about Ingrassia? His latest chronicle of the industry is called *Crash Course*, and once again the title says it all. So does Ingrassia get it right this time?

I won't make you wait for the answer: it's impossible to say. This time around Ingrassia takes a studiously descriptive approach to his subject, willing to forecast neither doom nor gloom nor anything in between. "Predictions are perilous," he admits at the end, and that's about all the fortune-telling we get from him.

The financial crash of 2008 will likely be remembered as the crisis that launched a thousand books. *Crash Course* is one of them, and it bears both the strengths and weaknesses of the quick-turnaround genre. Its biggest weakness is pretty much what you'd expect: it's brief, it covers a lot of ground with tick-tock prose, and it never takes us very far below the surface.

But that weakness is also its strength. Ingrassia never lets the plot slow down, and his just-the-facts-ma'am style makes this a terrific primer if you want to bone up on Detroit's first hundred years—as well as its final six months—but don't want to spend all day doing it. *Crash Course*, to use a metaphor that Ingrassia might or might not take as a compliment, is a Corvette of a book.

The stars, of course, are the Big Three, with various German, Japanese, and Italian car companies playing supporting roles along the way. And there are villains aplenty. Shortsighted executives more interested in personal perks and glitzy mergers than they were in designing cars that people wanted to buy. Union leaders living in an alternate universe where lofty wages, insane work rules, and gold-plated benefits could go on forever. Wall Street bankers who helped turn auto finance companies into subprime mortgage casinos. State legislatures who coddled contribution-rich auto dealers and obstructed any kind of rational brand management. And, of course, gasoline prices.

By the late '90s, the Big Three had essentially turned their businesses into giant hedge funds with only one hedge: that the price of gasoline would stay at a buck a



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gallon forever. In 2004, after oil prices had doubled in the previous two years, one of GM's executives told CEO Rick Wagoner that the company might be relying too much on trucks and SUVs. Wagoner refused to listen: GM had been the last company to cash in on the truck boom of the previous decade, and he was determined not to make that mistake again. The next year, with gas prices soaring in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and SUV sales plunging, GM forged ahead with the launch of yet another new line of full-size behemoths. By that point, with their product pipeline otherwise dry and a cost structure that made it impossible to make a profit on small cars anyway, they hardly had a choice.

Chrysler, meanwhile, with its focus on big trucks, was in equally bad shape. Not only were their small cars unprofitable, but they had harsh rides and cheap-looking interiors thanks to cost-cutting measures imposed by their bosses at Daimler years earlier in an effort to nurse them back into the black. The belt tightening worked temporarily, but by 2007 they were no better off than GM. Worse, maybe. That year Daimler finally cut its losses and sold off Chrysler to a private equity firm that knew a lot about financial engineering but not, as it turned out, very much about either mechanical engineering or labor relations. Things continued to go downhill.

By the time the economic meltdown of 2008 hit, Chrysler and GM were already on a knife edge. Only Ford was in decent shape, but even there it's hard to judge how much of that was good planning and how much was just luck. It's true that by 2008 Ford had gotten itself a new CEO and made some of the tough decisions GM and Chrysler had avoided—selling off weak subsidiaries, for example, and raising enough money to fund a multiyear turnaround—but that was largely because they had had their near-death experience a couple of years earlier. In a sense, they were in the worst shape of the three, but that turned out to be a lucky break: it forced them to clean up their company before the financial storm of 2008 hit.

The size of that storm was almost beyond belief. One of the continuing characters in *Crash Course* (along with a Chrysler dealer in South Paris, Maine, and an autoworker in Belvidere, Illinois) is Mike Jackson, head of AutoNation, the country's biggest chain of auto dealers. Ingrassia describes the events of September 2008 through his eyes:

> *No event since World War II—not the JFK assassination, not the attacks of 9/11, nor anything else—had caused such a quick collapse in car sales as the Lehman bankruptcy. For the first half of the month, sales were running at an annual pace of 14 million vehicles, which wasn't great but was bearable. But from September 15 onward the sales pace dropped another 30 percent, to under 10 million vehicles—the lowest level in nearly 30 years.*

Still, Ingrassia makes it clear that, big as it was, the financial meltdown didn't cause the Big Three's problems, it only exposed them more plainly. They would have been in deep trouble, heading toward Chapter 11 proceedings, regardless. But the auto industry—and GM especially—never really believed that. Even in 2009, after one round of bailouts and with a second on the way, they remained in denial. Steve Rattner, the Wall Street investment banker Barack Obama tapped shortly after his inauguration to head up his auto task force, quickly concluded that GM "might be the worst-managed company he had ever seen." But GM's CEO, Rick Wagoner, who had overseen $70 billion in losses since 2005, a money-losing debacle with Fiat, and plummeting market share during his tenure, was still stunned when Rattner asked him to resign as a condition of securing the second round of bailouts. All he could think of to ask was, "Are you going to get rid of Ron Gettelfinger, too?"—referring to the head of the United Auto Workers union. Rattner was dumbfounded by Wagoner's response. Later, he was equally dumbfounded when GM's board, demonstrating a seemingly inexhaustible sense of loyalty—if not the same amount of common sense—erupted in anger at his request. As late as March 2009, they were still convinced that Wagoner had done everything he could and was just a victim of bad luck.

So was the bailout a good idea? Rescuing GM was never in doubt—it was simply too big to be allowed to fail in the midst of an already deep recession—but Ingrassia reports that Chrysler was a close call. As well it should have been: worldwide auto production capacity in 2008 was about 94 million vehicles, compared to worldwide demand of about 60 million. Even when the economy rebounds, the world is going to be awash in both auto factories and auto companies, and something is going to have to give. Chrysler looks to be a pretty good candidate.

That's especially true since, even after an eleventh-hour makeover for Ford and Chapter 11 proceeding for GM and Chrysler, Detroit has hardly rid itself entirely of its pathologies. The UAW may have finally agreed to do away with the infamous Jobs Bank, which guaranteed workers 95 percent of their wages even when they were laid off, but their thousand-page collection of work rules remains mostly intact. Likewise, even though GM got rid of Oldsmobile in the early 2000s, it still retains far more brands than it needs—all of them tiny players on the global stage except for Chevrolet and Cadillac. And Ford, which declined government help and avoided bankruptcy, also avoided the opportunity to restructure its debt load.

In other words, it's probably not over yet. A couple of years from now, the Big Three may end up becoming the Big Two despite billions of dollars of taxpayer largesse. Except they won't be all that big anymore: Toyota passed both Chrysler and Ford in U.S. sales several years ago and is now nipping at GM's heels, while Honda and Nissan continue moving up the league tables as well. No matter what happens, the future of cars in America isn't likely to involve a Big Three. It'll be a Big Six—or a Big Five—and Detroit will no longer be its center of gravity. WM

**Kevin Drum** is political blogger for *Mother Jones* and a contributing writer for the *Washington Monthly*.



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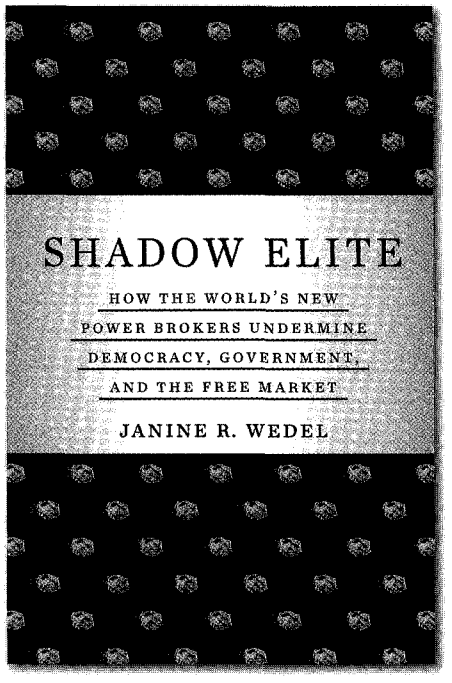
# Cabal TV

## The Washington "experts" who shape public opinion have private clients and hidden agendas.

**By Bruce Clark**




**Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market**

by Janine R. Wedel
Basic Books, 304 pp.

At the Lausanne Conference, which began in November 1922 and lasted until the following summer, the world's leading powers created a new political order in the former Ottoman lands. At least in public, the participants spoke in idealistic terms: the talk was of protecting oppressed minorities and making real the new principle of self-determination for small nations. But behind the scenes, the Western powers had other preoccupations, especially oil. The United States, a new player in the region's diplomacy (and technically just an observer at Lausanne), was keen to present itself to Turkey as a benign political and commercial partner, untainted by Old World intrigues.

America's senior envoy to the region, Admiral Mark Bristol, had been cultivating Turkey's rulers and doing his best to suppress information (about atrocities, for example) that might show his friends in a bad light. His boss, Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, was sympathetic: in another life he had been an attorney for Standard Oil, which coveted the oilfields in the Ottoman lands that now constitute northern Iraq. In April 1923, America's commercial diplomacy scored a triumph: a giant oil-and-railway concession was awarded by Turkey to an American syndicate, favored by Bristol, to the dismay of Britain and France. The concession collapsed (partly because Britain was occupying the lands it involved), but the pro-Turkish tilt among America's political, commercial, and intellectual elites continued. In respected American journals like *Current History*, articles began to appear in praise of the young Turkish state. The American public's sympathy for the travails of the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire, which had been overwhelming a few years earlier, was counterbalanced by a new narrative.

Has anything really changed? Governments still present their policies in terms of lofty ideals, even when cash and contracts are heavily on their minds. Public servants continue to have private interests that they often try to conceal or play down. And the brokers of financial and political power still use all available channels of information to create a benign atmosphere for their activities. In a startling recurrence, the oil deposits that were at stake in Lausanne, those of Iraqi Kurdistan, have recently triggered a fresh conflict-of-interest controversy. Peter Galbraith, a former U.S. diplomat who advised the Kurds on how to keep control of their resources in a federal Iraq, has acknowledged (and vigorously defended) his business interests in the region, including a contract with a Norwegian firm that developed Kurdistan's first oilfield. "I was a private citizen at the time [the contract was negotiated], and private citizens engage in business," Galbraith has said. But his credibility as a participant in deliberations about Iraq's future would surely have been affected if his business connections had been more fully and widely known.

So are today's dubious public-private ambiguities just a case of déjà vu all over again? Janine R. Wedel, a fellow at the New America Foundation and professor of public policy at George Mason University, thinks that something new is happening. She believes that government policy and public debate are being distorted in ever more inventive ways by the private interests, or the passionate beliefs, of small groups of interconnected individuals. She also believes that the social sciences offer useful ways to understand this pro-



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cess in which clusters of powerful individuals collude to pursue conspiratorial aims and protect one another. And she proposes some terminology to describe these versatile cabals.

In *Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market*, her study of the expanding gray area between the public and private sectors, Wedel focuses on two things: the outsourcing of government, and the capture by private interests of information and debate. She writes with passion about the risks of allocating previously public tasks (from designing weapons to running prisons or disbursing foreign aid) to corporations that are formally private, albeit sometimes very well connected with officialdom. As she argues, the conservative ideal of lean government, pared of unnecessary red tape, very easily slides over into government by contractor: the handing out of very sensitive jobs to operators who are relatively free from public scrutiny. After a certain point, contractors who deliver services to the government actually become the government. As a result, administration is not small, but rather comparable to an iceberg: a giant object of which the greater part is invisible. Demarcation problems are especially acute, Wedel believes, when big contractors have the task of choosing and overseeing smaller ones. Things also get fuzzy when contractors are installed deep inside government departments to form mixed teams. Sometimes the same individual can be classed as a regular government worker for some purposes and a contractor for others. Questions about who is accountable to whom for the use of public funds become impossible to answer.

In Wedel's view this blurring of government's edges creates a perfect habitat for the groups and individuals who fascinate her: fast-moving, close-knit clusters of cronies that she dubs "flex nets." Participants in these networks are adept at hopping inside and outside government, and helping their friends to show similar agility. As one example of a skilled "flexian"—another of her neologisms—she cites Steven Kelman, a Harvard professor who came to Washington in 1993 with a brief to overhaul the entire contracting process, with an emphasis on outsourcing. After formally leaving the government in 1997, he joined a Pentagon task force whose stated concerns included the health of the defense industry. At the same time, he was a director of a company whose annual turnover, of nearly $1 billion, was mostly in public contracts, and he was the author of a column in the trade press that urged governments to be nicer to contractors.

*This blurring of government's edges creates a perfect habitat for a certain type of people: fast-moving, close-knit clusters of cronies that Wedel dubs "flex nets." Participants in these networks are adept at hopping in and out of government, and helping their friends do so.*

If rule by contractor leads to one murky penumbra, a second is created by new sources of information and "debate" that in fact reflect the barely but cleverly concealed private concerns of powerful individuals and interest groups. The proliferation of print, broadcast, and electronic media has created an endless demand for plausible expertise—or "truthiness," as Wedel calls it, borrowing (and building on) a term coined by the comedian Stephen Colbert. This appetite for bite-sized news and comment creates a good environment for the establishment of think tanks that barely exist, except on letterheads which claim that distinguished people have offered their support, and for "experts" whose day jobs involve carrying water for various corporate interests. Here again, Wedel has a fair point. One fresh example of an especially opaque information source came to light just as her book was rolling off the presses. It involved Alex Castellanos, a paid CNN commentator identified by the network as a "GOP strategist." It turns out that while criticizing the Democrats' health care reform legislation on CNN, Castellanos, in his position as a media consultant, was placing ads for the health insurance industry and the Chamber of Commerce attacking that same legislation, without disclosing any of this to CNN or its viewers. He was subsequently retained by the Republican National Committee as an unpaid image consultant, even as he remains a paid talking head on CNN.

Readers who agree with Wedel thus far may well be less comfortable with the specific ways in which she applies her theories. Her main case studies are: post-Communist transition in Poland, in which some successful manipulators of the old system achieved mysterious success in the new one; the privatization of Russian industry, in which American advisers, especially a group from Harvard, played a central role; and, finally, the story of a cluster of American neocons who helped prepare the way for the Iraq War. She focuses in particular on three individuals: Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and Douglas Feith.

With respect both to Russian privatization and the Iraq War, she sets out to prove that gratuitously disastrous policies were pursued and popularized by groups of self-interested individuals, exploiting the imperfect boundaries between public and private, and between different countries: America and Russia, America and Iraq. But neither case perfectly fits her theory. For all its flaws, it can be argued that the method chosen for the privatization of Russian industry, including the loans-for-shares program, was the least disastrous course of action available at the time: it helped to ward off two much worse possibilities, namely the return to power of the unreformed Communists or a coup d'etat by the darkest elements in Boris Yeltsin's entourage.

In the case of the Iraq War, the disaster is there for all to see, and the subtle and not-so-subtle propaganda that prepared public opinion for the conflict (with false information about Baghdad's arsenal and al-Qaeda links) is a fine example of artificial "truthiness." The three men on whom Wedel focus-



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es did certainly play their part in preparing the way for the invasion: Wolfowitz and Feith were by that time senior figures in the Pentagon. But plenty of other powerful people were agitating for war with Saddam Hussein, especially after 9/11. So Wedel may be exaggerating the importance of her three chosen individuals. In the end, Perle's proposal for relying mainly on local opposition to overthrow Saddam Hussein was not followed; for that very reason he has been able to distance himself from the outcome.

Those reservations aside, Wedel's book is a clarion call against some insidious threats to a healthy democracy. If Wedel makes a successful argument in favor of something, it is a robust, courageous, and many-voiced media that can expose hypocrisy, secret agendas, and undisclosed conflicts of interest. The risk of improper crossovers between the public and the private may not be fundamentally different now than it was in the 1920s, but the scale of the problem has grown enormously. These days, government and quasi-government form a much bigger and more complex tangle than ever before. Also, round-the-clock cable television and other new media create a demand for instant commentary that highly partisan voices can artfully fill; genteel articles in learned journals are not the only outlets for propaganda. And lobbyists' money is sloshing around Washington, looking for direct and indirect outlets, on a scale that the oil companies of the 1920s would have found hard to imagine.

One striking example of the phenomenon Wedel describes was exposed recently in a long, painstaking investigation by the *New York Times*: the fact that General Barry McCaffrey, presented on television as an independent authority on military affairs, was also a paid consultant for a firm that was trying to sell a particular kind of armored car to the government of Iraq. The latter activity is perfectly legal, but anybody who is treated to McCaffrey's wisdom on the postwar governance and defense of that country should at least be given some idea of the ground on which he is standing. At a minimum, then, a stricter regime of disclosure is required.

Whatever rules are devised to outlaw and expose conflicts of interest, people will find clever ways to dodge them. But the "flexians" will not have things all their own way as long as there is an independent press that is prepared to devote financial and human resources to in-depth investigation. Fortunately there are still some newspapers with the courage and institutional strength to write about this kind of thing—but for how long? No less vital is the existence of nonprofit watchdogs like Sourcewatch or the Center for Public Integrity which expose the real funders and backers of supposedly disinterested pundits, politicians, and think tanks. But their work is subject to the limited budgets and fickle enthusiasms of the foundations that largely fund them.

Wedel's observations about the proliferation of supposedly independent think tanks may elicit a dismissive shrug from some Washingtonian sophisticates: surely nobody is fooled by bodies with names like "Americans for Health and Happiness" which turn out to be fronts for this or that environmentally noxious industry: after all, the funding of such outfits is a matter of public record. But people wouldn't set up such bodies if it served no purpose at all. Remember one of the wittiest advertising campaigns ever launched in the United States. An old curmudgeon named Garrison Boyd was presented as a spokesman for an imaginary lobby group called Americans for Disciplined Behavior, whose self-imposed mission was to warn citizens about the perils of a certain Dutch beer and the decadence it epitomized. The ad's real purpose, of course, was precisely the opposite—to make the beer seem naughty and attractive. But about a third of the people who saw the posters didn't get the joke: they thought the lobby group really existed. So Wedel is probably right to say that by setting up phony organizations, you can fool quite a lot of the people quite a lot of the time, and the result isn't always funny. WM

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Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation
(Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

1. Publication Title: Washington Monthly
2. Publication No.: 7046-403
3. Filing Date: October 2009
4. Issue Frequency: Bimonthly
5. No. of Issues Published Annually: 6 issues/year
6. Annual Subscription Price: $44.95
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: Washington Monthly, 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: Washington Monthly, 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036
9. Full Name and Complete Mailing Address of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor: Diane Straus Tucker, Publisher, 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036; Paul Glastris, Editor in Chief, 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036; Amy Stackhouse, Managing Editor, 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036
10. Owner: W. M. Corporation (a District of Columbia nonprofit corporation), 1200 18th Street, NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgages, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: None

Issue Date for Circulation Data at Right: Sept./Oct. 2009

| Extent and Nature of Circulation | Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months | No. Copies of Single Issues Published Nearest to Filing Date |
|---|---|---|
| **Total No. Copies** | 22,917 | 29,500 |
| **Paid and/or Requested Circulation** | | |
| Paid/requested outside-county mail subscriptions stated on Form 3541 | 12,087 | 8,230 |
| Paid in-county subscriptions stated on Form 3541 | n/a | n/a |
| Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales, and other non-USPS distribution | 1,899 | 4,871 |
| Other classes mailed through USPS | 0 | 0 |
| Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation | 13,986 | 13,101 |
| **Free Distribution by Mail (Samples, Complimentary, and Other Free)** | | |
| Outside-county as stated on Form 3541 | 653 | 546 |
| In-county as stated on Form 3541 | n/a | n/a |
| Other classes mailed through USPS | n/a | 592 |
| **Free Distribution Outside the Mail** | 2,223 | 2,300 |
| **Total Free Distribution** | 2,876 | 3,438 |
| **Total Distribution** | 16,862 | 16,539 |
| **Copies not Distributed** | 6,055 | 12,961 |
| **Total** | 22,917 | 29,500 |
| **Percent Paid/Requested Circulation** | 83% | 79% |

Washington MONTHLY

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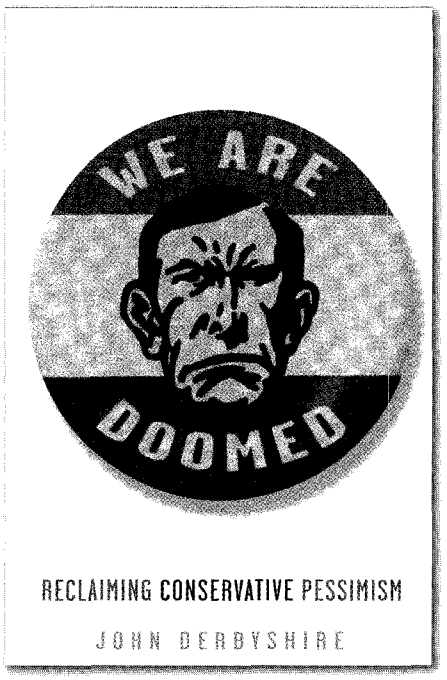
# Dark at the End of the Tunnel




**We Are Doomed: Reclaiming Conservative Pessimism**
by John Derbyshire
Crown Forum, 272 pp.

## John Derbyshire, America's foremost reactionary, is entertainingly glum about the conservative movement and his fellow man.

**By T. A. Frank**

If you've never been offended by John Derbyshire, then you probably aren't Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Latino, black, liberal, Arab, Asian, French, Irish, female, African, lesbian, or gay. Or else you just haven't been paying attention. Best known as a regular contributor to *National Review*, Derbyshire may be the foremost reactionary of our times. But he's also inquisitive and forthright, with an aversion to cant from right as well as left. If Derbyshire's a crank—well, he *is* a crank—he's also self-aware and, often, very funny. This makes him rather like a valued but embarrassing friend—great one-on-one, even if you can't take him anywhere.

It goes without saying that Derbyshire rubs liberals the wrong way, not least because half of what he writes seems calculated to rile them up as much as possible. This gains him notoriety (as when he suggested that Barack Obama might just be "Al Sharpton minus the pompadour and the attitude"), but at a cost. A stewed pensioner at the corner pub can be entertaining, but most people will miss anything important he has to say.

And Derbyshire does have some significant things to say. While few of them can be considered unique in the universe of ideas, rarely do they come together in one individual. To sum up Derbyshire's worldview, it might be described as one of nature over nurture, tribalism over internationalism, science over superstition (including religion, especially creationism), isolationism over interventionism, and Calvin Coolidge over FDR. Think H. L. Mencken, and then make pretty much zero adjustment for the passage of time. That makes Derbyshire an unusual voice in the debate over the soul of conservatism today. And even liberals, provided they have a tolerance for provocation, are likely to find him stimulating.

Now Derbyshire has come out with his first book-length work on politics. (He previously published a novel and two popularized histories of math.) Entitled *We Are Doomed: Reclaiming Conservative Pessimism*, Derbyshire's book makes a simple argument: pessimism about human potential is the key to a better tomorrow. Or at least a not-so-much-worse tomorrow, which is better than nothing.

Unfortunately, says Derbyshire, healthy pessimism has all but vanished from American society. Conservatism, pessimism's last best hope, has fallen prey to wishful thinking. As a result, while the left is devoted to brainless social engineering schemes, the right has become devoted to equally brainless social engineering schemes. America's conservatives (or former conservatives) have surrendered to feel-good idiocy, with deleterious consequences for nearly every aspect of contemporary life.

The major focus of *We Are Doomed* is on the limits of *Homo sapiens*. Derbyshire believes that if we humans try to reason our way out of our basic programming—if we believe our nature can be changed in any nontrivial way—only perverse results will follow. Unfortunately, he says, this is what we've been doing for the past fifty years. The results have been feckless and destructive policymaking on everything from immigration and education to welfare and warfare. In particular, our devotion to the idea of societal harmony has led us to



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believe that liberation from the prejudices and tribalism of yesteryear is only a generation or two—or a few dozen sensitivity training sessions—away. Worst of all, even self-proclaimed conservatives seem to agree.

How strong is Derbyshire's case? Well, no White House that invades Iraq believing that liberal democracy is man's natural state can be called conservative, even if many self-proclaimed conservatives supported just such an effort. So you might say that Derbyshire has won even before he's taken up the pen. But the author also has other points to make, and he makes a number of them rather well. For instance, drawing on a study by Robert Putnam on the inverse relationship between a community's social capital and its ethnic diversity, Derbyshire makes a strong case that policymakers haven't thought very seriously about the pitfalls of large-scale immigration. His dismissal of the "college racket, a vast, money-swollen credentialing machine for middle-class worker bees" certainly resonates with this middle-class worker bee. His musings on consciousness and free will are learned and playful. And his exasperation with various kinds of social engineering will find a sympathetic audience on both left and right.

At the same time, Derbyshire's politics are a great deal more to the right—or shall I say atavistic—than his premises about humanity require. Perhaps science will vindicate his belief that nature matters more than nurture and that IQ is, to a large extent, destiny. But even so, that needn't lead to a reversion to 1920s governance. You can still believe that many of our public schools deserve far more funding. You can believe that workers are entitled to bargain collectively and earn a living wage. You can believe that black Americans get treated unfairly in our courts. You can believe that energy efficiency and carbon reduction are worthy goals. You can believe that waterboarding prisoners is stupid and evil. You can believe that every American deserves affordable health care. You can believe that gay couples should be allowed to marry. None of these foregoing convictions is at the mercy of the latest findings of science. A hereditarian may hold them as easily as an environmentalist.

And Derbyshire's polemics weaken considerably when they concern topics outside the author's zone of enthusiasm. For instance, his attacks on pop culture are based largely, he admits, on "what I see on the way from my study to the liquor cabinet and back." That's a clue that holding one's peace might be wise. (Leave it to Jacques Barzun, who writes of our "demotic life and times," to place the decline of Western art in a proper we-are-doomed perspective.) Derbyshire's chapter on economics is likewise superficial. He laments the massive growth of government and the cushiness of government work, a trend that supposedly has taken concrete form in the mushrooming of mansions in suburban Virginia. But those mansions aren't inhabited by civil servants. They're inhabited by lobbyists, Pentagon contractors, and all other sorts of hangers-on enriched immensely by two fattening wars and a corrupt Congress. (Government hasn't been stealing from American business; it's been helping American business to steal from *us*.) And Derbyshire really phones it in on the housing crash, with borrowed guff about the Community Reinvestment Act, a narrative that could sway only the monomaniacal. But let us be charitable and assume he wrote that section under a rough deadline.

One last thing I found myself wondering as I read *We Are Doomed* was this: Who's the audience here? True, the book is addressed explicitly to "conservatives," but who among them does Derbyshire suppose is actually open to persuasion? The handful of subscribers to the *American Conservative* magazine are mostly on board already. I suppose a few readers of *National Review* will grant him a hearing. But what otherwise remains among today's self-identified conservatives is an uninviting collection of Christian fanatics, neocons, militia groups, and Republican hacks. Deaf ears, no?

Derbyshire admits to having his rest disturbed by the idea, in the words of a friend of his, that "historic conservatism is anti-science, prone to celebrate truth by authority, favors religion over rationalism and deep down sees unvarnished truth corroding social cohesion." But perhaps Derbyshire's friend is only partly correct in his description. Surely, there's a word for that kind of thinking—namely, rightism. If conservatism is about skepticism and resistance to change, rightism is about extreme faith in state power wielded by one's own side and paranoia toward all opponents. Throw in a martial fetish and you've pretty much got an international right-wing travel kit. Neo-Nazis, for instance, are rightists, but no one would call them conservatives. (Nor, obviously, would anyone call Marxist guerillas liberals.)

And Derbyshire, despite occasional water carrying for his wacky right-wing buddies (and flunking a major sanity test by sticking up for Sarah Palin), is still a conservative. That means staying honest generally trumps considerations of advancing the "conservative movement," whatever on earth that is at this point, and that his real audience is a rather small one of genuine conservatives and, yes, genuine liberals. For while liberals and conservatives may vote differently, they operate intellectually along a continuum. To either side, ideology is the enemy, running up against the skepticism of the conservative and the open-mindedness of the liberal. This intertwined sensibility of liberalism and conservatism—as opposed to leftism and rightism—has long been central to the politics of the United States, perhaps thanks to our English roots. (President Obama, a liberal, not a leftist, is a prime example.) But the tradition looks increasingly fragile amid the lost marbles of today's American right. I think of an article on Newsmax a few months ago in which the author entertained the idea of a military coup against the current White House. Welcome, Argentine future. But I suppose Derbyshire and I have different fears.

As one might expect, Derbyshire ends his book on a downer, invoking Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days*, in which Winnie, the heroine, sustains a cheery optimism while buried up to her waist (and, later, her neck) in a mound of earth. Winnie, he says, should be our "model." As for the future of real conservatism? The best Derbyshire can do is play Lear to its remains. "If I stare hard enough at the corpse of American conservatism," he writes, "I sometimes fancy I see a slight twitch or a passing flush of color. Just my imagination? Who knows?" I think, in the Palin era, it's safe to say it's Derbyshire's imagination. But his conclusion is fitting, offering no uplift at the end of the road. And, fortunately, his wit offers ample joys along the way. WM

**T. A. Frank** is an Irvine Fellow at the New America Foundation and consulting editor of the *Washington Monthly*.



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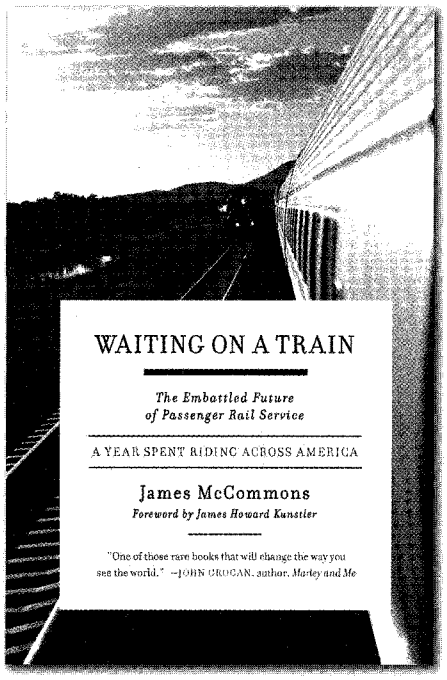
# Sentimental Journey




**Waiting on a Train: The Embattled Future of Passenger Rail Service—A Year Spent Riding Across America**

by James McCommons
Chelsea Green, 304 pp.

## Exploring the long-ignored—and suddenly important—world of passenger rail.

**By Phillip Longman**

James McCommons insists he is not a rail fan. This is not uncommon among those who work for, or with, the rail industry. To be a rail fan is to be what actual railroaders call a "foamer." In their extreme form, these are the people who chase trains in their cars while clicking pictures and listening in on train crew chatter with their handheld radio scanners. Police and rail crews often mistake them for terrorists or for some kind of nut. This has created some controversy among foamers themselves about whether the Bill of Rights should protect them from being regularly harassed and sometimes arrested. In December 2008, Amtrak police collared a man named Duane Kerzic and handcuffed him to a wall in a holding cell in New York's Penn Station for an hour after he refused to delete images of trains he had taken while standing on a public platform; it didn't matter that Kerzic was clicking away in hopes of winning an Amtrak-sponsored photo contest. The Amtrak police, unable to prove he was a national security threat, nailed him for trespassing.

So I understand why McCommons says he's not a rail fan. (Neither, I hasten to add, am I.) A *real* rail fan, after all, would never make the mistake of asserting, as McCommons does in passing, that the pre-1971 California Zephyr ran on the Union Pacific. (It was the Western Pacific, Jim, along with the Rio Grande and the Burlington.) Still, McCommons spent almost all of 2008 riding Amtrak trains back and forth across the country, telling folks he met along the way that he was doing research for a book on the future of passenger rail. Not a bad cover story, and he stuck to it, though he did at times draw suspicion from rail officials when they learned of his travel history. The resulting work, *Waiting on a Train: The Embattled Future of Passenger Rail Service*, is part travel log, chronicling both the horrors and the pleasures of riding Amtrak, and part solid political and business reporting on the rail industry that hardly any other journalist is doing. This is the part of the book that is highly relevant to non-foamers.

Starting with the Obama administration, governments at every level across the country are gearing up with big plans for rail. Competing for the $8 billion dedicated to high-speed passenger rail by the stimulus bill, for example, more than forty states plus the District of Columbia have submitted rail proposals totaling $57 billion to the once-sleepy Federal Railroad Administration. Both the cap-and-trade bill and the big surface transportation bill now overdue for reauthorization in Congress promise even bigger federal spending for rail. Many states, from Maine to Michigan and California, are spending their own money to fund passenger trains and, in some instances, such as Virginia, are investing in freight rail as well, to get trucks off the road.

Trains suddenly make sense to a lot of people who never paid much attention to them before—enviros, "smart growth" and industrial policy types, even erstwhile highway planners and billionaire financiers. But there's a problem. Aside from foamers, there are few people left in America who know much about rail, and what the foamers know (the consist, car numbers, and flag stops of the 1949 California Zephyr, for example) isn't particularly useful. This is where McCommons's book could come in very handy, if, say, you are a mayor hoping to secure passenger rail service for your town, or a real estate investor with a transit-oriented development in mind. It would



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also be a useful read if you are a journalist or investor trying to figure out why Warren Buffet just plopped down $34 billion to buy a quarter of the nation's rail infrastructure, or why Bill Gates's largest single holding after Microsoft is a railroad stretching from New Orleans to Vancouver and Nova Scotia called the Canadian National. Because in the course of his Amtrak odyssey, McCommons managed (despite being occasionally rebuffed at first as a suspected foamer) to talk to nearly all the key members of the small fraternity of people left in this country who do have practical knowledge of railroading—including its engineering, its economics, and its rarefied politics.

And so the reader picks up, for example, on the very different corporate cultures of the nation's major freight railroad companies (which, with rare exception, own the tracks on which Amtrak runs its trains outside of the Northeast). Some, like Union Pacific, have, at least until very recently, been hostile to passenger trains and regularly sideline Amtrak trains for hours to make room for its freights. "You need to understand this," McCommons quotes one UP executive saying to one of his sources.

> *If [Amtrak] is right to the minute on time and an ass in every seat, we don't care. If you are nine hours late and nobody is on the train, we don't care. If you have engine trouble and are stuck, we don't care. If you bring a few million to the table in incentives, we don't care. We are a $3 billion company, it means nothing to us. So no matter what Amtrak does. No matter what you do, we don't care. WE DON'T CARE.*

(Union Pacific declined McCommons an interview, but he got to just about everybody else who matters in the rail industry.)

Other freight railroads, like Burlington Northern Santa Fe, the 32,000-mile colossus Buffet just bought, have a more progressive reputation, but still are not eager to share their rights-of-way with passenger trains unless they're well compensated and protected from liability issues. If you want passenger rail in your town, you'll have to get to know freight rail executives, or form alliances with people who do, and work on deals to gain access to their privately owned infrastructure.

Similarly, you may need to do some serious community organizing. McCommons tells a delightful tale of three mayors, all of them of women, of small East Texas towns served by Amtrak's Texas Eagle. It's a slow, quaint train that meanders down from Chicago to San Antonio on its eventual way to Los Angeles. Few people ride it all that distance, but for people in towns along the route of the Eagle, like Mineola or Marshall, Texas, it's a lifeline. When Amtrak threatened to cancel the service some years ago, the three mayors formed what they labeled the "East Texas Ladies Auxiliary" and with the help of U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson went to work to save the train. To make a long story short, the Eagle runs today because a successor group of volunteers now not only lovingly maintain the stations along the line and greet passengers, they also handle marketing, ticketing, and pricing. "Now, the reason I'm good at setting prices is because I know the passengers," one tells McCommons. "I know why Aunt Mary takes the train, how often she does, and what she is willing to pay. No Web site or ticket agent on a telephone knows Aunt Mary like I do ... in my opinion, sir."

Yes, the passenger rail business in the United Sates, so long neglected by most of us, can be just that quaint and dependent on individual personalities. Many are low-level bureaucrats, working out of cubicles in various state departments of transportation, surrounded by rail maps dating back to the nineteenth century. Most state DOTs are still dominated by highway builders, but McCommons takes readers along with him to visit key government employees in a few states, such as California, Washington, Wisconsin, and North Carolina, where the culture of the state DOT has become pro-rail, usually under the leadership of strong personalities, like Wisconsin DOT Secretary Frank Busalacchi. States that have developed deep working relationships with Amtrak, the freight railroads, rail suppliers, and unions are likely to get most of the burst of federal spending on passenger rail because they have projects that are "shovel ready" and because they have the rail industry contacts they need to make them happen. Other states are like Florida, which during the eight years of Jeb Bush's benighted governorship gutted the rail division of the state DOT and walked away from its early leadership in high-speed rail, and which now struggles to secure even lowly commuter trains for the traffic-choked Orlando and Tampa Bay areas.

> *Trains suddenly make sense to a lot of people who never paid much attention to them before—enviros, "smart growth" and industrial policy types, and financiers like Warren Buffet, who just plopped down $34 billion to buy a quarter of the nation's rail infrastructure.*

McCommons's book will also help you form an opinion about the great unresolved issue surrounding high-speed rail—one that the Obama administration should decide on before shoveling billions out the door for rail projects: How fast does high-speed rail have to be? California is planning a line that would whisk passengers between San Diego and the San Francisco Bay Area at speeds up to 220 mph on a brand-new right-of-way that wouldn't be shared with freight trains. This would give California world-class rail service of the kind France or China enjoy, and over time it could pay for itself by spurring economic develop-



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ment and reducing the need for new airports and highways. But it is fantastically expensive to get started and time consuming to build, not least because it involves the taking of much private property for the new right-of-way.

Arguably, many more communities could be served, sooner and for far less money, by projects that simply boosted the speed of passenger trains upward to around 110 mph, which would allow them to run on existing tracks and share the cost of the infrastructure with slower but profitable freight trains. This approach has the added benefit that capital spending for improved track and signaling would help freight railroads to get more trucks off the highways, even as it provided many more Americans with passenger service that is fast enough to beat driving or taking a plane. It's a humble vision compared to that of gleaming bullet trains, but perhaps a more practical and equitable one as well.

As for McCommons's account of his journeys on Amtrak, I'll just say that I've been aboard all the trains he describes and more, and his travel log accurately reflects what one is likely to find riding the rails across the heartland. Trains outside the Northeast Corridor are frequently late, and the service provided by their on-board crews is usually fine but can also be dreadful—kind of like with airlines these days. Yet Amtrak's ridership, though tamped down by recession, has been growing for years despite aging equipment and all the industry's other problems. To ride across America enjoying the privacy of your own sleeper-car room, and also the sociability of dinner in the diner with strangers who often become friends (as well as all the electricity you need to keep your laptop and cell phone charged and actually get some work done), is a civilized experience more and more Americans are seeking out. College students, retirees, and small-town residents still make up the bulk of Amtrak's long-distance riders, but more and more these days I meet worldly scriptwriters, computer programmers, and other professionals who have had it with airports and interstates and welcome the opportunity for either the concentrated work or the deep relaxation that train travel offers. With proper funding, and faster, more frequent service, passenger trains can regain their storied place in American life—and you don't have to be a rail nut anymore to see that. WM

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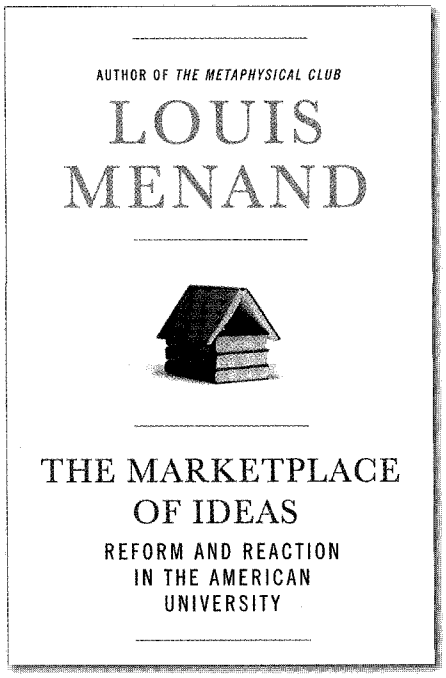
# Tenured Moderates

## Universities are not so much lefty as they are resistant to change.

**By Kevin Carey**




**The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University (Issues of Our Time)**

By Louis Menand
W. W. Norton, 176 pp.

It's axiomatic among many conservatives that universities are, outside of Cuba, the last refuge of unreconstructed Marxism, hippie havens where ideals of eternal truth have been discarded in favor of mindless relativism and the multiculturalist agenda, moral dead zones where students do little more than indulge their basest instincts, all on the taxpayer's dime.

Louis Menand doesn't engage these arguments directly in his new book *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*—he's too smart and serious a writer for that. But he does address many of the legitimate and vexing questions behind them. Part history of higher education, part sympathetic but insistent argument for change, Menand's book is a worthy and admirably succinct exploration of why colleges are so difficult to improve.

Each of the book's main chapters is devoted to one of four issues. The first is general education (a standard conservative bugaboo), the reluctance of most colleges to insist that there are some things every undergraduate should learn. The problem, says Menand, is that while standard curricula are often framed in terms of canonical books and enduring ideas, they have historically been implemented for present-day reasons. Columbia University's famous Great Books–focused Contemporary Civilization course, still required of all sophomores today, was originally called "War Aims" and was created at the behest of the U.S. military for students enrolled in the World War I equivalent of the ROTC. *General Education in Free Society*, the influential 1945 report spearheaded by Harvard President James Conant, was a "Cold War document." To resist the temptations of fascism and communism (or, as Conant put it, the "Russian hordes"), Americans needed to be connected by shared beliefs. General education has always been defined as what students need in order to contend with the particular world in which they live.

This cuts against the liberal arts' identity as distinct from the vocational and mundane. "In a system that associates college with the ideals of the love of learning and knowledge for its own sake," says Menand, "a curriculum designed with real-world goals in mind seems utilitarian, instrumentalist, vocational, presentist, anti-intellectual, and illiberal." Nonetheless, Menand (who teaches English at Harvard and labored on that university's latest attempt to define a common core) is ultimately unsympathetic to the liberal educator's instinct to "pull up the drawbridge, to preserve college's separateness at any price." It rests on a "superstition," he says: "that the practical is the enemy of the true."

The second chapter focuses on the embattled humanities and the "legitimacy crisis" they have undergone in recent decades, with disciplines coming to resemble snakes ingesting their own tails in a never-ending process of challenge and deconstruction whose principles have become, themselves, a new framework for inquiry. Menand deftly grounds this issue in the post–World War II history of higher education, particularly as reaction to the "Golden Age" of 1946–75, which saw a massive expansion in enrollment and capacity along with a huge influx of funding to support Cold War research and a resulting emphasis on a scientific (some would say scientistic) approach to scholarship. Menand warns against pinning the subsequent backlash, which begat gender, cultural, gay and lesbian, and postcolonial studies, among others, on the more-or-less simultaneous arrival of female and minority students to higher education in large numbers. Nearly all of the scholars who touched off the humanities revolution, he notes—Richard Rorty in philosophy, Stanley Fish in English, Clifford Geertz in anthropology, and so on—were white men. In the end, Menand sees much value in the humanities' intellectual struggle. "It is not just asking questions



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about knowledge; it is creating knowledge by asking the questions."

He has considerably less enthusiasm for interdisciplinarity, the subject of chapter three. While acknowledging that the current academic disciplines "do not carve knowledge at the joints, and they did not drop down out of God's blue sky," he chafes at faddish enthusiasm for an argument that is actually *anti*-disciplinary: that breaching traditional scholarly divisions can "refresh old paradigms and, almost by itself, generate radically new perspectives and ideas." Menand again turns back the clock, this time to the years 1870 to 1915, the "big bang of American higher education" when the discipline-based model of the American research university was born.

The keys to disciplinarity were autonomy and professionalization—the creation of communities of scholars who determined the process for both transmitting and certifying expertise. This specialization allowed for the deep inquiry necessary for knowledge creation in an increasingly complex world, while also checking elitism by limiting the authority of scholars to their chosen field. As currently practiced, with professors of, say, literature and anthropology teaching a single class, interdisciplinarity doesn't just ratify the divisions; it fetishizes them, says Menand, creating a situation where scholars "just shout at each other from the mountaintops" of their respective fields. He sees the whole issue as "displaced anxiety about the position of privilege that academic professionalism confers on its initiates *and* about the peculiar position of social disempowerment created by the barrier between academic workers and the larger culture."

The final chapter addresses the liberal bias of the professoriate, another perpetual conservative complaint. While acknowledging the obvious—62.2 percent of professors self-identify as liberal, compared to 19.7 as conservative—Menand is more alarmed by homogeneity. Only 9.4 percent of faculty members say they're "extremely liberal," he notes, and professorial self-assessment is actually much more accurate than that of the general public when verified against questions about discrete issues. Most are garden-variety Democrats, the kind of people who voted for John Kerry, not Ralph Nader. Assuming that the now-retiring tenured radicals of the 1960s and '70s are disproportionately on the extreme left, this lack of diversity is likely to get worse. Menand proceeds to the right question: Does higher education *make* people liberal or does it *select* for liberals? His answer: Some of both. Menand puts most of the blame on a system of graduate education where supply and demand are hugely out of whack. One study of English PhDs ten years after graduation found that only 5 percent had tenure at a research university. Success in such a ruthless tournament depends heavily on intellectual conformity to the existing scholars whose opinions determine whether you live or die.

Themes of history and systems run throughout *The Marketplace of Ideas*. American higher education is "still a nineteenth century system, put in place for late nineteenth century reasons." It's been around so long that people can't see it anymore. "It gets internalized. It becomes a mind-set. It is just 'the way thing are.'" This is an immensely valuable insight, and the volume covers a great deal of ground in less than 200 pages. So it seems unappreciative—or to risk the cardinal reviewer's sin of criticizing a book for not being another book—to ask for more.

But Menand makes some crucial assumptions that unnecessarily limit the scope of his analysis. He begins by defining the university mission as "the production and dissemination of knowledge—that is, research and teaching." This is the preferred formulation, and not by accident, because it flatters the standard university model by suggesting that research and teaching missions work in harmony.

They don't. Most college courses are only tangentially connected to the academic subspecialties of those who teach them, and the learned habits of research often translate into lousy classroom instruction. Moreover, students come to college seeking not just knowledge but *skills*, the abilities on which careers and professions are founded. Indeed, Menand himself shows this well. His opus, *The Metaphysical Club*, won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for more than just keen insight into the intellectual history of the nineteenth century. It also features, in the words of reviewers, "graceful, witty prose" that contains "clarity and energy" and is "amazingly readable." It's not a coincidence that, unlike most of his peers in the academy, Menand is also a staff writer for the *New Yorker*. Those crucial skills are given short shrift, both in academia and in this book.

Menand tries to define away the distinction:

> *I focus on what is in reality a very thin slice of the whole—undergraduate and graduate education in the liberal arts and sciences. Most of the 4,000 institutions of higher education in the United States are not liberal arts schools: that is, they award less than half their degrees in the liberal arts fields. Twenty-two percent of college graduates major in business; only 2 percent major in history. Most of what I have to say concerns higher education as experienced by the history major, rather than the business major, and most of my examples are taken from elite liberal arts institutions ... there are many institutions for which the problems I discuss are either irrelevant or non-problems.*

But business majors need a general education too, if anyone does. Most college courses are taken outside of majors, not within them. The humanities matter everywhere and for everyone. MIT, for example, isn't exactly a liberal arts school, but Menand's father still taught political science there, with distinction. The professoriate may prefer to live in rarefied enclaves of "knowledge creation," but that doesn't mean it's a good idea. The practical and true go hand in hand.

Indeed, if higher education is ever going to break out of the nineteenth-century arrangements that increasingly prevent it from keeping pace with our accelerating present day, it needs to start by recognizing that it doesn't serve nineteenth-century students anymore. The work now is much harder. There are many more students, of many different kinds, who need a fantastic variety of knowledge and skills to thrive in the modern world. Yet the colleges and universities we've built to teach them are still chained to an older time. Menand's critique bears the mark of someone who is, rarely, in academia but not of it. It's a crucial vantage point, one that could be used to benefit not just Harvard and its ilk but the wide world of everyone else. WM

**Kevin Carey** is the policy director of Education Sector, an independent think tank in Washington, D.C.



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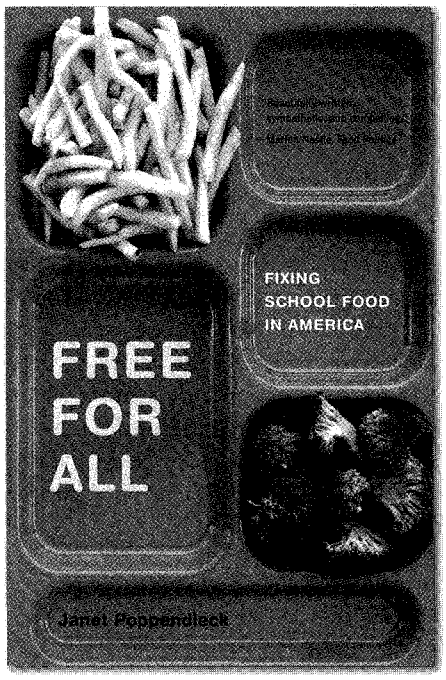
# Unhappy Meals

## How school lunch programs manage to promote obesity and hunger at the same time.

**By Michael O'Donnell**




**Free for All: Fixing School Food in America**

by Janet Poppendieck
University of California Press, 368 pp.

In his brilliant and distressing essay on the cruelties of English boarding school life in the 1910s, "Such, Such Were the Joys," George Orwell devoted a few lines to the prevailing attitudes toward feeding children. A boy's appetite was seen as "a sort of morbid growth which should be kept in check as much as possible." At Orwell's school, St. Cyprian's, the food was therefore not only unappetizing but calorically insufficient; students were often told "that it is healthy to get up from a meal feeling as hungry as when you sat down." Only a generation earlier, school meals began with "a slab of unsweetened suet pudding, which, it was frankly said, broke the boys' appetites." Orwell described sneaking, terrified, down to the kitchen in the middle of the night for a slice or two of stale bread to dull the hunger pains. His contemporaries at public school had it better, and worse: so long as their parents gave them pocket money to buy eggs, sausages, and sardines from street vendors, they scrounged enough food to get through the day.

This spirit of tut-tut character building through patronizing if affectionate deprivation comes off as thoroughly British, but for a time the attitude spanned the Atlantic. In 1906, one American principal opposed the growing enthusiasm for a school lunch program by warning: "If you attempt to take hardship and suffering out of their lives by smoothing the pathway of life for these children, you weaken their character, and by so doing, you sin against the children themselves and, through them, against society." Let them starve a little, went the thinking—it won't kill them, and it's better than getting fat on sweets.

Shameful, no? So now we have swung around a full 180 degrees to the opposite extreme, at least in American school lunchrooms. As Janet Poppendieck writes in *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*, we live in "a new age in which a business model ... permeate[s] school food." Where lunchrooms in the past treated children as lucky recipients, they now view them as customers whose business must be won. Vending machines light up the hallways, usually through an exclusive contractual arrangement between school or school district and a company like Coca-Cola or Pepsi. Fast-food operations like Subway and KFC set up shop in the food court, tempting away all the students with enough money to afford a hoagie or fried chicken strips. Alongside the traditional cafeteria meal are a la carte lines where burgers and French fries (and their unholy cousins, tater tots) glisten with grease under the lamplights, exempted in all their fatty glory from USDA nutritional requirements. Even those children who buy the standard hot meal eat mostly junk: pizza with fries hits all of the major food groups, if you define the groups expansively enough. As Ronald Reagan's USDA famously taught us, ketchup is, after all, a vegetable.

If depriving schoolchildren 100 years ago grew out of the social Darwinist view that suffering and want build character, the current, equally ridiculous system owes much to poor eating habits at home, and to the philosophy that children must above all be enabled as autonomous decisionmakers from the day they take their first step. Parents these days feel an almost crippling need not to overstep—they must guide children's choices, rather than intervene and make those choices on the children's behalf. Poppendieck describes her consternation at seeing cafeteria workers catering to a child's every impulsive demand, rather than, as in her day, intervening when Junior tries to substitute an extra brownie for his broccoli.

With the business approach to school food come money woes, and these permeate Poppendieck's excellent, informative, if occasionally dry book. School districts simply



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do not have the funds to make ends meet, and hence the drive toward vending machines and a la carte junk food lines. Under the National School Food Lunch Program, there are three tiers of school meals: free ones for the poorest children, reduced-price ones for those with somewhat greater means, and full-price meals for everyone else. All of the meals, including the full-price ones, are subsidized and therefore artificially cheap. And it is hard to break even when your most expensive meal costs $1.50, so school districts have increasingly turned to unregulated (and pricier) a la carte lines, the income from which goes straight back into the cafeteria program, and vending machines, which help fill out the schools' general discretionary budgets. Sell enough Twizzlers and you might be able to afford new uniforms for the marching band.

*School districts simply do not have the funds to make ends meet, and hence the drive toward vending machines and a la carte junk food lines. Sell enough Twizzlers and you might be able to afford new uniforms for the marching band.*

In one of *Free for All*'s best scenes, Poppendieck attends the School Nutrition Association's Child Nutrition Industry Conference in Austin, Texas, to learn the latest approaches to branding and marketing one's school food program to children. Junk food certainly sells. But beyond the obvious, branding the cafeteria with a theme is a useful approach, and then you plaster the theme everywhere. A motif like "café.com" stenciled on the trays, napkins, server hats, and ladles will apparently make the place cool enough for children to patronize; Hawaiian and Dr. Seuss themes have also succeeded.

Poppendieck's survey of the broken school lunch program is sophisticated and nuanced, and her conclusions, which tend toward healthier food and greater funding, are generally sound, with one notable exception. She is far too easy on the USDA, which administers and regulates the school lunch program on the federal level. When the National School Lunch Act was passed in 1946, Congress described it as a way "to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities." Ever since, the school lunch program has been a captive and exclusive market for subsidized agribusiness products, like corn (and high-fructose corn syrup), meat, and dairy. Our farm system is propped up by the worst type of corporate welfare to the biggest industrial producers, and foisting their artery-clogging products on schoolchildren is the inevitable result of USDA's stewardship.

As in other contexts—most notably the regulation of animal welfare in farms and slaughterhouses, which is the USDA's charge—the agency is completely captured by industry interests and therefore incapable of enacting meaningful regulations. The USDA's provisions restricting the sale of "foods of minimal nutritional value" in schools, for instance, define that term so loosely that a candy bar containing peanuts exceeds the threshold, escaping regulation. When the rule was enacted thirty years ago, it was rightly described by critics as "a total cave-in to the snack food industry." Poppendieck's resistance to the call by many reformers to transfer the school food program from the USDA to the Department of Education is therefore frustrating, and a little baffling.

Another central concern of *Free for All* is school hunger—an ironically persistent problem in an age of plenty and excessive freedom of choice. Schools have largely failed to reduce the stigma that accompanies accepting a free lunch. In many schools, nonpaying children stand in separate lines from their classmates, and in some California schools they are the only students who eat inside in the cafeteria rather than outside in the pay-as-you-go food court, because the trays cannot be taken out of doors. Poppendieck is justifiably outraged by this insensitivity, which segregates children by income and leads some to skip meals so as to avoid cruel jibes from their wealthier friends.

Her solution to the problem of stigma, which feeds the problem of hunger, is not novel but is nonetheless radical. As the book's title suggests, she recommends free school lunches for all children. She estimates that such a universal food program would cost roughly twice today's expenditures: from about $12 billion to about $25 billion. Whatever may recommend it, it is therefore unlikely to be enacted. Poppendieck explores many possibilities for finding the money, and frankly acknowledges that they present a tricky seesaw of progressive and regressive conundrums. Taxing soft drinks in schools, for instance, is a sensible idea, but such a tax, like all regressive taxes, would fall disproportionately on the poorest students, and therefore offers an unsatisfactory means of paying for universally free lunches that are meant to help the poor. A universal program is also regressive by its very nature because it would spread resources currently directed toward poor children to children from middle- and even upper-class families. In interviews with Poppendieck, cafeteria workers in Beverly Hills chafed at the notion that taxes on their meager incomes should provide free lunches for the BMW-driving crowd. Poppendieck too quickly writes off more practicable (and less expensive) solutions like swipe cards, which would disguise whether and how much each child pays.

However problematic and politically untenable a program of universally free school lunches may be, Poppendieck is right to confront the scourge of school hunger alongside the problem of laissez-faire junk food consumption by children. In a sense, we currently occupy the two worst extremes: overweight youth living off vending machine confections coexisting with students who cannot get enough to eat because the school system is chronically broke. Orwell would be appalled. WM

**Michael O'Donnell** is a lawyer and writer living in Chicago.



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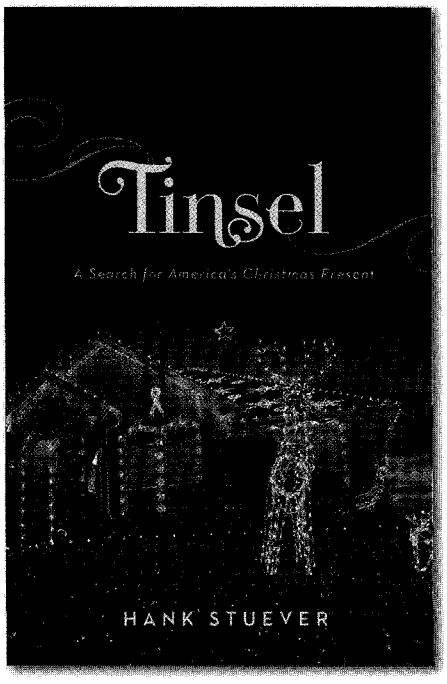
# I Want All for Christmas

## The holiday season, deeply observed, in an affluent Dallas suburb.

**By Jamie Malanowski**




**Tinsel: A Search for America's Christmas Present**

by Hank Stuever
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 352 pp.

Pillar of the economy, climax of the calendar year, and wellspring of sentiment, myth, and moral teaching, Christmas is that institution which is so influential, so pervasive, so enormous that it seldom requires more than a pop lyricist to help reveal itself. A phenomenon more ripe for journalistic scrutiny, then, would be hard to find, which is why Hank Stuever, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, spent three Christmas seasons in the Dallas suburb of Frisco, where he was well positioned to observe suburban Americans performing their holiday rituals in their native habitat. The product of his study is *Tinsel: A Search for America's Christmas Present*, a stylishly written and often delightful book that aims to capture all the things that Christmas is about—family, values, religion, ritual, celebration, kitsch.

Stuever first embedded himself in Frisco in 2006, a year that will soon glow with the status of legend as the last good year before money troubles set in, and he was around in 2008 in time to see the rollercoaster car crest but left before it had plunged all that far. He was certainly fortunate to have seen the good times, for what is Frisco but a place built on the assurance of prosperity? After all, McMansion-packed bedroom communities cemented to one another by enormous shopping malls don't spring up on former prairie land without cheerful optimism ruling the HR departments at Southwest Airlines, Texas Instruments, Frito-Lay, and all the other companies headquartered in Dallas and its environs. None of the people Stuever meets are J. R. Ewing rich, but none of the people we spend a great deal of time with really worry about money. Even the poorest—and we're talking about a woman with a good job who has paid off her home—is someone whose children can afford to buy her a big-screen hi-def TV for her bedroom, even though she already has one in there that works perfectly well but just isn't quite as large or deffy as the new one. This woman, whose name is Caroll, a couple in their early thirties named Jeff and Bridgette Trykoski, and Tammie Parnell, a wealthy soccer mom who has a holiday decorating business, are Stuever's main subjects; by the end of the book, we know them not only as people but as consumers. We remember Caroll, for example, as much for her Black Friday pilgrimages to Best Buy, and the annual ritual she and her daughter share of going to Penney's and picking up the holiday snow globe she gives away every year, as for her work at her megachurch. Of course, why wouldn't we be familiar with these people? We're all part of the same homogenized culture. To one degree or another, they are us.

It's fortunate that a writer of Stuever's gifts has undertaken this mission. On page after page, he is wry and witty and astute. Here's his description of a local landmark:

> *Where the LBJ [Freeway] meets U.S. 75 is an interchange of stacked ramps called the High Five, which is so revered by drivers that the Dallas Morning News asked its readers to send in their most stirringly artistic photos of it. Lately a few citizens have been leaping to their deaths off the High Five. I can think of no greater compliment to the builders of intricate freeway spans than to attract both poetry and despair.*

Here is his sly summation of the local houses:

> *Architecturally, the Dallas suburbs seem oddly determined to become a replica of the English countryside, a posh world of make-believe polo matches and fox hunts. The houses all have*



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*the fieldstone veneers and the eight-foot mahogany-stained doors, the rounded interior Sheetrock corners, the skip-trowel wall finishes, the wrought-iron balusters on the foyer stair ... They are the luxury homebuilding equivalent of the boob job.*

One of Stuever's most likable qualities is his enthusiasm, which seems most evident when he encounters Americana in abundance, prompting him to break out in long, giddy sentences: "The entrepreneurs here [at a flea market] do business under names such as Razzl Dazzl, Appli-Kaye's, Good Old Stuff, Santa's Ranch, Thinkin's Pink, Aged With Grace, Debbie's Closet, Quiltin' Cousins, Mary's Makins, and Nuthin' But Ribbon." Margaret Mead must have been pleased with what she discovered in Samoa, but you could never sense her heart fluttering in her text.

As perhaps you've gathered, among Stuever's most prominent gifts is that he is a noticer, an observer gifted with insight and nuance and an eye for detail. Consider this description of Bridgette and Jeff Trykoski:

*Bridgette is a clotheshorse who keeps a mental list of pros and cons about the area's malls—Stonebriar Centre in Frisco (mostly cons) versus the Shops at Willow Bend in Plano (mostly pros)—and a list of reasons why none of the jeans or tops in her closet are right for the dinner or happy hour she's planning on a given weekend. Jeff wears the same thing every day—clothes Bridgette buys for him ... "Khaki pants, brown shoes, brown belt that goes with the brown shoes, shirt from Dillard's that goes with the brown shoes, brown belt, khakis," she says about his Monday-to-Friday wardrobe. (Weekends: stonewashed blue jeans and Aggie sweatshirts.)*

Now, this is an eye for detail that rivals Tom Wolfe's. But as any fifteen-year-old can tell—and as those still in touch with their inner fifteen-year-olds can confirm—noticing is powerfully disturbing, and often in effect no different than criticizing. If you were to say to a fifteen-year-old—neutrally and without affect—"You're the only one here wearing [for example] a turtleneck," you might well induce a week of fraught self-examination, and perhaps win for that turtleneck eternal banishment from the wardrobe, just for the crime of having invited scrutiny. Stuever won't tell you if there's anything significant about Jeff's brown and khaki uniform, but based on the way that Stuever presented the information, I'll bet that you've drawn a conclusion.

This happens throughout the book: Stuever drives right up to the edge of a conclusion, then takes his foot off the gas. He tells us, for example, that the Trykoskis have decided not to have children, shows us in detail Jeff's absorbing-verging-on-compulsive dedication to creating elaborate Christmas lighting displays, and tells us the couple won't travel to visit their families on Christmas because they need to be home to tend to the display, which causes hard feelings among the relations. If you're like me, you're thinking that this young couple seems like they have some complex feelings about family, but it's not a subject Stuever probes. Instead, he just lays this information out there, amid lots of other observations, leaving it to the reader to connect whatever dots seem to warrant connecting. When Stuever does this, unfortunately, all the energy he's amassed with his wonderful descriptions fizzles away.

Perhaps this approach stems from a lack of conviction: Steuver loves Christmas but hasn't put up a tree anywhere he's lived for the past two decades; he recognizes the cheesiness in Christmas kitsch but also kind of digs it; he understands the banality and hollowness of consumerism but loves the mall enough to close the bar at Applebee's more than a few times; he doesn't believe in God but loves believers. My guess is that same indecisiveness affected Stuever when it came time to write about the people central to his story, and since he was being called on to portray people who had taken him into their homes and opened themselves to his world-class noticing, and since none of them were war criminals or egomaniacal business moguls or coke-addled actresses, he decided to use broad strokes rather than commit psychoanalysis.

It's our bad luck that Stuever isn't heartless; he does have a theme working here, even if he doesn't ruthlessly drive it home. It emerges from the lips of his great discovery, Tammie Parnell, the wealthy supermom (Stuever tells us to think Holly Hunter) who earns herself about $30,000 in the six weeks after Veterans Day festooning the McMansions of indolent or occupied or unconfident peers with yuletide gewgaws fresh from Guangdong Province. Early in the book, Stuever joins Tammie on the prowl for decorations:

*I ask Tammie if anybody has a real tree, or if she ever uses real greenery on the mantel.*

*Almost never, Tammie answers bluntly. None of it is real. She tells me to underline this one fact in my notes: "Fake is okay here."*

*It is faux-finished, plasticized and derivative—but that's not the point. Tammie has Christmas figured out. It has less to do with true authenticity than a feeling of it ... "Absolutely fake is okay here. Diamond earrings. Christmas trees. If you want me to prove that fake is okay here, let's you and I go to the Stonebriar Country Club pool one day and check everyone out. You will see that fake is okay here."*

This is an idea that underlies much of what Stuever finds in Frisco, including the Christmas gift drive that inspires charity with descriptions of specific youngsters with heart-softening needs; it turns out that the needs are real enough, but the recipients are as fictional as Tiny Tim Cratchit. Of course, a writer who hit these notes harder than Stuever does would risk falling into the trap of preachiness, of echoing exhausted clichés about the true meaning of Christmas that would likely go in one door of the mall and out the other. Perhaps this is a subject that even an accomplished journalist like Stuever can take only so far before needing to entrust it to the more adept hands of someone with a more profound ability to portray in an illuminating way how innocence can cloak our obliviousness, how our sentimental invocations of a babe in a manger and an angel in Bedford Falls blinds us to our unyielding appetites. If there's another Robert Altman out there, won't you please stand up? Your great subject awaits. WM

**Jamie Malanowski** is a New York writer.



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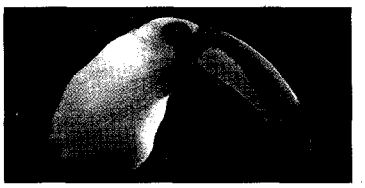
**2nd day–Poás Volcano, Cloud Forest**
This morning enjoy a drive through Costa Rica's famous coffee growing region. Next, weather permitting, visit Poás Volcano. You can safely view inside the dramatic crater from an overlook. Next, hike the Escalonia Cloud Forest Trail, home to epiphytes, orchids, ferns and tropical hummingbirds. Cloud forests are like rainforests, but with less rain and more humidity. Lunch. Visit the National Museum. See ancient mysterious stone spheres. Then, see San José's Plaza de la Cultura, Central Park and the National Theatre. Visit the Gold Museum. Enjoy dinner. **BLD**

**3rd day–Butterfly Garden, Tortuguero**
Scenic morning drive through Braulio Carrillo Park. Look for cascading waterfalls. Visit a butterfly garden. See a banana plantation. Then, cruise through rivers and canals to the 47,000 acre Tortuguero National Park. Tortuguero is home to more than 300 species of birds. Look for toucans, parrots, kingfishers and the rare green macaw. Enjoy lunch. Next, an afternoon boat excursion into Tortuguero Park. Look for otters, turtles and manatees. Listen to the joyful sounds of the jungle. Enjoy a two night stay at your lodge. Dinner. **BLD**

**4th day–Tortuguero Park, Canal Cruise**
Cruise this morning with naturalist guides along canals lined by raffia palm, habitat of howler and white-faced monkeys, green iguanas and tropical birds. Look for white and snowy egrets and the amazing nests of the montezuma oropendola. Then, enter the mysterious reflecting waters of Caño Palma wildlife reserve. Next, visit the Green Turtle Research Station. Learn about efforts to protect the turtle's nesting habitat, eggs and young hatchlings. Walk along the Atlantic turtle nesting beaches. Next, to Tortuguero village. Meet Costa Rican school children on your visit to a local school (when in session). Return to your lodge for lunch. Free time to enjoy the swimming pool and tropical flower gardens at your lodge. Dinner. **BLD**



**5th day–Pineapple Tour, Fortuna**
Morning cruise on Tortuguero River. Enjoy lunch. Visit a pineapple plantation. Sample Costa Rica's famous sweet organic pineapples. Next, through scenic countryside to the San Carlos Valley for a two night stay in Fortuna. Dinner. **BLD**

**6th day–Caño Negro, Arenal**
Head north this morning, passing through sugar cane, teak and orange plantations. Then, cruise on the Rio Frio which runs through the world famous Caño Negro wildlife refuge, home to many migratory birds found nowhere else in Costa Rica. Look for whistling ducks, roseate spoonbills, cormorants, anhingas, blue heron, and northern jacanas. Watch for caimans, crocodiles, spider monkeys and web-footed, water-walking lizards. Lunch. Return to Fortuna. Then, enjoy a relaxing soak in the volcanic hot springs. Weather permitting, see nearby Arenal Volcano's softly glowing lava flow. Enjoy dinner. **BLD**

**7th day–Hanging Bridges, Guanacaste**
This morning enjoy an unforgettable adventure in the heart of the rainforest at the Hanging Bridges, rated one of Costa Rica's top tourist attractions. Hike on six suspension bridges, through lush tropical rainforest canopy. Enjoy views of a waterfall and look for tropical birds. Later, a scenic drive around Lake Arenal. Enjoy lunch. Then, tour a coffee cooperative where local family farmers process their coffee. Enjoy fresh Costa Rican coffee. Next, enter the Guanacaste province. Drive through the only tropical dry forest in Costa Rica. Stop in Liberia. Then, to Costa Rica's beautiful Pacific Coast for a two night stay. Dinner is at your resort. **BLD**

**8th day–Pacific Coast, Guanacaste**
This morning drive to the nearby Natural Trail of Hacienda Pinilla. This tropical bird and wildlife sanctuary is home to the playful howler monkey. Lunch. Enjoy a carefree leisurely afternoon. Time to beachcomb or swim the pristine beaches of your resort. Dinner. **BLD**

**9th day–Handicrafts, San Jose**
Morning drive through the cattle ranches of Guanacaste. Stop at the Monteverde Cooperative. Sample delicious Monteverde Cheese. Continue en route to the Central Valley, time to shop for colorful handicrafts, including painted oxcarts. Enjoy lunch. Return to San José. Farewell dinner. **BLD**

**10th day–San José**
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